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**The Vocational Curriculum in England 1974-1994: A Socio-historical  
Study of the Business and Technology Education Council's National  
Diploma in Business and Finance**

**Roy Fisher**

**A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**The School of Education and Professional Development  
The University of Huddersfield**

**September 1999**

# CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgements	v
Abbreviations	vi
Tables	viii
Abstract	x
<b>CHAPTER 1 - Introduction and Methodology</b>	<b>1</b>
The Vocational Curriculum	1
Rationale for the Study	3
A Socio-historical Study	8
The Structure of the Study	13
Some Philosophical Considerations	18
The Participant Observer as Invisible Researcher	20
Critical Realism, Critical Theory and Postmodernism	28
Four Thinkers	32
The Sample	36
Triangulation	42
In Summary	43
<b>CHAPTER 2 - Theoretically Contextualising the Curriculum</b>	<b>44</b>
Introduction	44
Gramsci and Vocational Education	46
<i>Theorising Social Relations in a Diffuse Culture</i>	49
<i>Post-Fordism and the Vocational Curriculum</i>	51
<i>What Kind of Pedagogy?</i>	55
Althusser and Vocational Education	59
Foucault and Vocational Education	63
Lyotard and Vocational Education	68
Conclusion	72
<b>CHAPTER 3 - The Historical Development of Vocational Education in England</b>	<b>73</b>
The Historical Function of Schooling	76
Vocational Education and Training	83
Post-Fordism and Vocational Education and Training	94
The "Era of BTEC" and the Road to Competence	97
Competence and Control	101

<b>CHAPTER 4 - Ideology, the Curriculum, Lecturers and the Organisational Context of Vocational Education -</b>	<b>108</b>
Ideology, Culture and Hegemony	110
The Curriculum and Reproduction	117
Teachers	135
The Further Education College as a Workplace in Transition	141
Summary	160
 <b>CHAPTER 5 - The Inception and Development of BTEC</b>	 <b>161</b>
Introduction and Background	161
BEC	171
BTEC	175
 <b>CHAPTER 6 - Tracing the Evolution of the BEC/BTEC Curriculum</b>	 <b>184</b>
Introduction	184
The Underlying Philosophy of BEC/BTEC	187
Six Generations of a Curriculum	193
<i>A Brief Outline of Generation 1</i>	200
<i>A Brief Outline of Generation 2</i>	202
<i>A Brief Outline of Generation 3 and Generation 4</i>	202
<i>A Brief Outline of Generation 5</i>	204
Entry Requirements and BEC/BTEC Programmes	205
The Structure/Design of BEC/BTEC Programmes	209
The Content of BEC/BTEC Programmes	210
The Evolution of Skills	223
Assessment and BEC/BTEC	228
Strategies of Implementation and the BEC/BTEC Curriculum	235
Learning Strategies Prescribed by BEC/BTEC	239
Monitoring/Quality Control Systems and BEC/BTEC	244
Conclusion	247
 <b>CHAPTER 7 - Perceptions of BTEC</b>	 <b>250</b>
BTEC Students: Academically Second Class?	253
Vocationally Qualified?: Some Views of BEC/BTEC Business Courses as a "Passport" to Employment	258
Opening the Door?: Some Views of BEC/BTEC Business Courses as a "Passport" to Higher Education	272
In Conclusion: Strengths and Weaknesses	289



<b>CHAPTER 8 - Conclusion (s): Four Critiques</b>	<b>300</b>
Introduction	300
Gramsci	302
Althusser	309
Foucault	313
Lyctard	321
Coda	323
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>	<b>329</b>
<b>APPENDIX A</b>	<b>Sample Questionnaires [unnumbered]</b>
<b>APPENDIX B</b>	<b>Description and Discussion of Quantitative and Qualitative Data 1-116</b>
<b>APPENDIX C</b>	<b>Interview of John Sellars OBE, Chief Executive of BTEC, Conducted by Roy Fisher at BTEC Head Office, Central House, Upper Woburn Place, London on 25 January 1994 1-20</b>
<b>APPENDIX D</b>	<b>National Registration Figures for the BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance and the BTEC Advanced GNVQ in Business: 1986/87 to 1998/99 1-2</b>

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I have been fortunate to have conducted two lengthy interviews with John Sellars, the former Chief Executive of BTEC, one of which was generously scheduled during his last week in office after twenty years at the helm. It should be noted, however, that this does not imply any kind of endorsement of this study by either John Sellars or BTEC/Edexcel.

This work rests primarily on my academic background as a history graduate, my subsequent interest in the sociology of education, and my experience as a lecturer and curriculum developer in post-compulsory education. My studies in the sociology of education began when, as a masters student at the University of Bradford, I was taught by Dr. Ivan Reid and continued under the supervision of Dr. Ian Varcoe in the Department of Sociology at the University of Leeds. In Chapters 3 and 4 I have revisited, developed and applied in the context of this very different study some theoretical work which I undertook at Leeds in the late 1980s. There has also been something of a "conversation" between this research and other projects which I have worked on since 1992; the Employment Department funded study *Good Practice in GNVQ Induction Programmes* which, together with University of Huddersfield colleagues, I contributed to during 1993/94 was one of these. Another influence was the Further Education Development Agency funded *Improving College Effectiveness* project from 1998-99 (also a Huddersfield team effort). It is likely that some extracts from Chapter 4 here will ultimately appear in a co-authored FEDA publication, however, all the work featured in this study was independently researched and is my own, as are all errors and omissions.

## **Abbreviations**

<b>A Level</b>	Advanced Level of the GCE examination
<b>BEC</b>	Business Education Council
<b>BTEC</b>	Business and Technician Education Council
<b>BTEC</b>	Business and Technology Education Council
<b>CBI</b>	Confederation of British Industry
<b>CIHE</b>	Council for Industry and Higher Education
<b>CBET</b>	Competence Based Education and Training
<b>CGLI</b>	City and Guilds of London Institute
<b>CNAA</b>	Council for National Academic Awards
<b>CSE</b>	Certificate of Secondary Education
<b>DE</b>	Department of Employment
<b>DES</b>	Department of Education and Science
<b>DFEE</b>	Department for Education and Employment
<b>DoE</b>	Department of the Environment
<b>DTI</b>	Department of Trade and Industry
<b>FE</b>	Further Education
<b>FEDA</b>	Future Education Development Agency
<b>FEFC</b>	Further Education Funding Council
<b>FEU</b>	Further Education Unit
<b>GCE</b>	General Certificate of Education
<b>GCSE</b>	General Certificate of Secondary Education
<b>GNVQ</b>	General National Vocational Qualification
<b>HE</b>	Higher Education
<b>HND</b>	Higher National Diploma of the BTEC
<b>HTC</b>	Huddersfield Technical College
<b>LEA</b>	Local Education Authority
<b>MSC</b>	Manpower Services Commission
<b>NACEIC</b>	National Advisory Council on Education for Industry and Commerce
<b>NATFHE</b>	National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education
<b>NCE</b>	National Commission on Education
<b>NCVQ</b>	National Council for Vocational Qualifications
<b>NVQ</b>	National Vocational Qualifications
<b>OFSTED</b>	Office for Standards in Education
<b>O Level</b>	Ordinary Level of GCE
<b>OND</b>	Ordinary National Diploma
<b>PCAS</b>	Polytechnics Central Admissions System
<b>QCA</b>	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
<b>RSA</b>	Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufacture and Commerce
<b>SCAA</b>	Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority
<b>SLS</b>	Social and Life Skills
<b>TEC</b>	Technician Education Council

<b>TEC</b>	Training and Enterprise Council	
<b>UCCA</b>	Universities Central Council on Admissions	-
<b>ULEAC</b>	University of London Examinations and Assessment Council	
<b>VET</b>	Vocational Education and Training	
<b>WO</b>	The Welsh Office	



## **Tables**

	<b>Page</b>
<b>Table 1</b> Four Thinkers	33
<b>Table 2</b> Populations Sampled in Survey of Perceptions of BTEC National in Business and Finance	39
<b>Table 3</b> Dimensions of Traditional and Liberal Progressive Education	53
<b>Table 4</b> The Levels of BEC/BTEC Awards	194
<b>Table 5</b> An Outline of the Development of the BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance/Advanced GNVQ in Business 1979-2000	196-199
<b>Table 6</b> National Level "Common Core" Modules	200
<b>Table 7</b> Aims of the BEC National Awards	201
<b>Table 8</b> First Destinations of BTEC National in Business and Finance Students 1990 - 1992	257
<b>Table 9</b> "How, in your view, do employers and potential employers generally rate BTEC qualifications?"	261
<b>Table 10</b> "How do you rate the BTEC National Course as a practical preparation for employment?"	266
<b>Table 11</b> Offers and Rejections Received by BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance students by Four Key Business Related Subjects	276
<b>Table 12</b> Performance on Selected University Degree Courses 1982-87	278
<b>Table 13</b> Performance on Business and Management Studies University Degree Courses 1982-87	278
<b>Table 14</b> Performance on Law University Degree Courses 1982-87	278
<b>Table 15</b> "How do you think staff in higher education generally regard the BTEC National qualifications?"	280



<b>Table 16</b>	"How do you think staff in your institution generally regard the BTEC National qualifications?"	280
<b>Table 17</b>	"How do you rate the BTEC National Course as a practical preparation for Higher Education studies?"	284

## **Abstract**

The BEC/BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance was, from the late 1970s to the mid 1990s, a major vocational award in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Although the majority of BEC/BTEC students were located in the further education colleges within the somewhat marginalised post-compulsory sector, the BEC/BTEC National level curriculum was directly experienced by hundreds of thousands of students as well as their lecturers, and indirectly by a range of educational stakeholders including employers and university tutors coming into contact with former BEC/BTEC students. Having transformed the rhetoric and substantially altered pedagogic practices within further education the BTEC National Diploma was beginning to establish an identity when it was, in effect, superceded by the Advanced GNVQ in Business. Notwithstanding the significance of BEC/BTEC as a major awarding body the associated curriculum attracted relatively little interest from researchers, receiving only a fraction of the attention which has been attracted by the more recent NVQs and GNVQs. This study is primarily a curriculum history which aims to provide an account of a curriculum which was conceived and implemented at a time before policy makers had come to recognise the value of the post-compulsory sector as an engine for potentially improving national economic performance, and as a catalyst for the creation of a culture of life-long learning. The study attempts to theoretically contextualise the BEC/BTEC curriculum as an important instance of vocationalism. Ideas drawn from Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault and Lyotard are utilised in order to provide a critical but multi-perspectival analytical framework. The study incorporates an outline discussion of vocationalism in England; an account of the genesis and development of BEC/BTEC as an institution; an overview of various versions (or "generations") of the BEC/BTEC National curriculum as well as those which have superceded it (using course specifications and associated documents); and presents perceptions of the BEC/BTEC National curriculum drawn from a questionnaire survey and interviews. The BEC/BTEC National curriculum is seen as an innovatory curriculum which, for many students, presented important opportunities to progress. It is suggested, however, that ideological assumptions implicit in the model of vocationalism as operationalised in late Twentieth Century capitalism have necessarily emasculated the critical potential and intellectual integrity of vocational education and training in England.

## **Chapter One**

### **INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **The Vocational Curriculum**

During the 1990s the vocational curriculum became a regular and important subject of both educational and political debates in Britain. This, perhaps, reflected something of the economic and cultural re-orientation of a society which was striving to come to terms with the challenges of competing in global markets where new knowledge and information based industries were considered to be the key to the creation of national wealth. Over the previous two decades the number of students involved in study for vocational awards had shown considerable growth. A total of 326,658 students had registered with the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) awarding body alone during 1996 (Edexcel 1997), this number having risen through 68,129 in 1982 from a base of less than 20,000 registrations with the Business Education Council (BEC), BTEC's predecessor body, in 1978 (BEC 1983). The vocational curriculum then is one which, in its various forms, has made an impact directly on millions of individuals in the United Kingdom today. Notwithstanding this, it is still typically seen as something outside the mainstream of educational experience and there is little doubt that vocational curricula in general, and, given their relative significance, those of BTEC and its predecessor bodies in particular, have been under researched by educationalists and other social scientists. A review of the literature concerning BEC/BTEC programmes, including the growing number of journal papers published in the general area of the vocational curriculum in further education, will be undertaken as part of this study. Whilst some recent work

has recognised the importance of BTEC awards (Higham, Sharp and Yeomans 1996; Edwards, Taylor Fitz-Gibbon, Hardman, Haywood and Meagher 1997; Yeomans 1998; and, especially, Bloomer 1997) there has been, to date, no major study which has focused primarily on the genesis, nature and development of these innovative and widely influential programmes. Moreover, there has been no attempt critically to contextualise this history in relation to relevant strands of thought within social theory.

Following Goodson (1994), for the purpose of this study, the curriculum will be conceptualised as a social artifact which is manifestly socially constructed. It will also be regarded as a product which is, in effect, created and consumed in the context of a series of complex interactions and relationships. Stenhouse (1975) outlines the development of the modern understanding of the curriculum from the basic view of it as "a course of study" which would be specified in some form of written prescription. In this sense the curriculum may be seen as *an intention* regarding what should be learned. Added to this is the issue of what *actually happens in reality*. This opens a new and more complicated but much richer vista by seeing the curriculum as the experience of a learning process which incorporates the official and the unofficial, the formal and the informal, and the conscious and the unconscious. The notion of curriculum employed in this study will encompass an outline review of the structures of specific programmes published by BEC and BTEC, but it will also consider some less tangible issues arising from the prescribed and actual modes of implementation, as well as the ways in which various



stakeholders perceived the award. This stance implies agreement with Kelly's (1989) suggestion that

...there are more aspects to curriculum than are dreamed of in the philosophy of most teachers, and certainly of most politicians, and a definition of curriculum which confines its scope to what teachers, or politicians, actually plan will omit many of the important dimensions of curriculum studies...

(p. 14)

In undertaking the task of studying a particular curriculum and attempting to make sense of its creation, development and meaning as a social product which is designed, manufactured and consumed there is a need to acknowledge that an adequate representation is unlikely to be possible if the approach made is rooted in a single perspective or discipline. In this case the project has been formulated in order to create a study which will make it possible to explore historical and sociological approaches as frameworks which offer a particular means through which the vocational curriculum formulated by BEC/BTEC may be understood. Historical and sociological perspectives have, of course, permeated various educational and curriculum theories as well as each other. Before elaborating on the process/methodology of the study, however, it is appropriate that the need for, and purpose of, the work in question should be clearly established.

### **Rationale for the Study**

This study has been undertaken in order to provide an account of the BEC/BTEC curriculum as a particular instance of vocational education in England. In so doing it will seek to address a perceived gap in the field of curriculum studies. It is intended, however, that the scope of the study should



go beyond the production of a descriptive narrative which, whilst necessary and currently unavailable, would on its own be likely to provide little more insight than that which any interested party with some grounding in the area might obtain from reading the relevant course specifications and associated documents. The primary purpose of this study is to produce a theoretically contextualised socio-historical account of a particular curriculum, the BEC/BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance, which is an important instance of vocationalism in post-compulsory education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The study will constitute an attempt to provide an account of *what was*, (which, of course, can only be accounted for in the context of “here and now” and is a formative part of the present), and it will not be overly concerned with *what ought to be*. In adopting this focus the study may be perceived as one which should be located within the field of curriculum history. Such a classification would not be unreasonable, but this should not obscure the desire to create an analysis which will employ ideas which might be regarded as essentially sociological or social philosophical. In this respect the study may well reflect a certain convergence which has been noted in the production of both sociological and historical scholarship. In presenting itself as a history of the BEC/BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance the study will recognise the need for a contextualisation which discusses the wider terrain of vocational education and, at the same time, will necessarily operate within certain containing limits which will involve decisions about what is included and what is excluded. Like all histories it will therefore be selective and partial, and an indication of the nature of and basis for the chosen scope will be provided in the chapter outlines which appear below.

The *Technician Education Council* (TEC) and the *Business Education Council* (BEC), the bodies which combined to form BTEC on 1 January 1983, were established in 1973 and 1974 respectively (Macfarlane 1993; BTEC 1994a). Both TEC and BEC had been set up as a consequence of recommendations which were made by the *Haslegrave Committee on Technician Courses and Examinations* when its report was published in 1969 (DES 1969). The following three decades witnessed profound and seemingly continuous change in vocational education in England. During this time Vocational Education and Training (VET) has increasingly become a focus for social and political discourse and, latterly, has been attracting a relatively high level of journalistic attention. It has also been the subject of "Think Tank" publications (for example, Ball 1990a; Cassels 1990; McClure 1991; Pilkington 1991; and Secondary Heads Association 1991), as well as featuring strongly in a number of government commissioned reports and White Papers (MSC 1981; MSC and DES 1986; DE 1988 and 1989; DES 1988 and 1989; CBI and NCVQ 1990; NCVQ 1990; NCVQ and Training Agency 1990). The DES/DE/WO (1991) White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* set out various proposals for further education (FE) and included a significant commitment to boost the esteem of vocational qualifications in order to bridge what was by now an officially recognised academic/vocational divide. This led to the piloting In 1992 of the first General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs). By the end of 1994 the BTEC National Diploma programmes which are the subject of this study were, in effect, being phased out in order to accommodate the new Advanced GNVQ in Business (BTEC 1993a). Only a

residue of centres still offer the award and it will shortly disappear completely (see *Appendix D* for a summary of BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance registrations between 1986 and 1999). The advent of GNVQ was a consequence of an intensified political interest in issues of education, training and the economy (and therefore the vocational curriculum), and it has consequently enjoyed a level of academic scrutiny which its predecessor never received (Edwards 1997). Besides a considerable number of journal papers, several important texts have focused on GNVQ awards and/or their context (Higham, Sharp and Yeomans 1996; Bloomer 1997; Edwards, Taylor Fitz-gibbon, Hardman, Haywood and Meagher 1997; and Young 1998).

The existence of an antipathy towards vocationalism, indeed towards the notion of industry as an economic activity, within English culture has been widely discussed in relation to education (Crosland 1974; Cheit 1975; Edwards 1977; Reeder 1979; Silver 1983; and Silver and Brennan 1988). The genesis and social implications of such attitudes have been of interest to historians (Bamford 1967; Thompson 1968; Sanderson 1972; Foster 1974; and Weiner 1981) and have also occupied economists and sociologists, leading to the production of a number of seminal studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Willis 1977; and Gamble 1981). Several significant studies in the early 1990s continued to explore questions arising from this issue of cultural orientation towards the vocational (Apple 1990; Avis 1991; and Donald 1992a and 1992b). It is against this background of pro-vocational rhetoric, politics and



policies existing contemporaneously with anti-vocational sentiment in the national culture that BEC/BTEC courses sought to establish themselves and to gain credibility. This context was reflected in BTEC's recognition of the need for marketing and publicity materials which projected the rationale for acquiring vocational education and training. The incorporation of aspects of progressive pedagogy into VET has been a source of conflicting enthusiasms and hostilities as well as considerable ambivalence (see Jones 1983 and 1989; Avis 1991; Donald 1992a; Hodgkinson 1991 and 1994; Bates 1998a and 1998b; Bates, Bloomer, Hodgkinson and Yeomans 1998; Bloomer 1998; Helsby, Knight and Saunders 1998; Knight, Helsby and Saunders 1998). Research regarding employers' and universities' perceptions of BTEC courses has suggested a sometimes less than warm response for those holding such qualifications (Fisher 1990 and 1998). Large scale and influential empirical studies undertaken by Smithers (1991) and Smithers and Robinson (1991) underlined the problems of recognition and acceptance which hampered BTEC awards in the employment and higher education marketplaces.

The "National Level" of BTEC courses, which claims broad equivalence to GCE Advanced Level (or National Vocational Qualification Level 3), is that which was the most heavily subscribed in terms of student numbers and was also pivotal in terms of negotiating the crucial transition from further to higher education. The concentration of this study on Business and Finance courses has been made not only in order to maintain a manageable focus, but also because these courses were the first to be implemented by BEC and

subsequently provided something of a model for other fields of study within the BTEC and, ultimately, General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ) frameworks. A further factor is that business courses address the notion of economic production in a way which is simultaneously generalised and direct; on the one hand allowing for a wide choice of possible careers across the broad spectrum of employment possibilities, and on the other being unequivocally concerned with the production and service activities of business and supporting enterprises. In that particular sense business studies, (or “business and finance”), courses present the essence of vocationalism in education.

### **A Socio-historical Study**

...there are no distinctions between the methods of investigation open to historians and sociologists, or the forms of concepts which they can and should employ...

Giddens (1987) (p. 224)

...history (as a discipline) is most appropriately regarded as a specific discursive regime, governed by distinctive procedures, through which the maintenance/transformation of the past as a set of currently existing realities is regulated. It constitutes a disciplined means for the production of a 'historical past' which exercises a regulatory function in relation to the 'public past'...the conduct of historical debates and their (always provisional) resolution decisively influence the public face of the past over the long term. Yet such debates require, as a condition of their intelligibility, the sense of a distinction between past and present and an orientation to historical records as if they comprised a referent. That this referent proves to be intra-discursive and so mutable does not disable the historical enterprise. To the contrary: the discipline's social productivity consists precisely in its capacity to reorganise its referent and thus transform 'the past' - not as it was but as it is.

Bennett (1990) (pp. 50-51)

The early 1970s saw the emergence in England of a body of research which sought directly to address questions regarding societal power structures and



the curriculum. This work, which collectively became known as "the New Sociology of Education" strongly influenced radical neo-Marxist scholars in the United States, notably Michael Apple and Henry Giroux (Ladwig 1996). More recently, there has arisen a concern amongst some scholars of the curriculum to create studies which construct historical accounts on the basis that a deepened and grounded understanding of the genealogy of the curriculum might usefully advance both educational knowledge and practice (Goodson 1994). This study is one which is predicated on a respect for the illuminatory potential of both the sociological and the historical traditions of scholarship, but it is one which is also profoundly conscious that both these fields have been subject to crises, and that each has been challenged with regard to its academic legitimacy, status, or continued relevance (Hindess and Hirst 1975). Indeed, a study which defines itself as socio-historical might easily be charged as being contradictory, schizophrenic or oxymoronic in nature. That this is possible, or even likely, is both understandable and welcome. Understandably because such views are often a reaction to, and also a consequence of, postmodernist relativism; welcome because they underline the essentially provisional and contingent status of studies which deal with contemporary issues which have yet to run their course. To deny an element of epistemological instability would be to reify a field where discourse has been, in effect, decentred by the late Twentieth Century crisis which is currently endemic in social theory. Goodson (1999) has described the way in which changes in the global economy have repositioned education and schooling and, indeed, have repositioned the work of educational researchers to create what he has termed a "crisis of positionality" where there is "...no

firm ground to stand on and to remain in the same place is to risk one's position being changed nonetheless." (p. 279). This is a context where even the conventional act of imposing definitions and fixing meanings can be, and has been, legitimately questioned (for example, Stronach and MacLure 1997).

The relationship between history and sociology has been far from convivial. Burke (1992) argues that whilst historians have frequently risked a "parochialism" of place (or geographical region), social theorists run the danger of a parochialism of time (being fixed in the present). Burke welcomes the appearance during the 1980s of a "theoretical turn" in social history and a concomitant "historical turn" from some social theorists. Pickering (1997), in bemoaning a perceived gulf between history and the burgeoning field of Cultural Studies, evokes Frederic Jameson's "...injunction to 'always historicise'." (p. 4). Given that a curriculum may be regarded as a form of cultural text then the need for it to be historically situated and contextualised is an important one. A coherent and plausible account of the development of a curriculum together with some analysis of the conditions of its implementation creates the possibility of capturing something of its essential nature.

The contribution of Ivor Goodson (1985a; 1987; 1994 and 1995) has been fundamental to the emergence and establishment of curriculum history as a relatively independent field within educational studies. Goodson was able to engender academic recognition of the social significance of curricula and, by stressing the importance of the application of historical method in the study of

the curriculum, he promoted what has been acknowledged as a "...qualitative shift in the analysis of curriculum." (Baker 1996 p. 106). Part of this was owing to the recognition that curriculum history should properly be concerned with more than the development of syllabi in that it also implicitly encompasses the processes and contexts of student learning. Baker's (1996) discussion of the work of McCulloch (1987) and Musgrave (1988) identifies issues in the construction of curriculum history in different national contexts. In particular Baker (1996) calls for a "methodological shift", urging the employment of frameworks "...where the sensitivity of poststructuralist concerns for multiple perspectives..." (p. 115) is combined with a desire to examine structures of race, gender and class oppression as issues in curriculum history. The study which follows may be seen as a partial response to such a call. Whilst race and gender will not be specifically explored, the analysis of a vocational programme designed specifically to meet the economic interests of capital must necessarily identify and consider contradictions and class antagonisms which are embedded in the curriculum both as product and process. More specifically, multiple theoretical perspectives will be employed in order to interrogate the nature of the vocational curriculum from angles which, whilst sharing a critical orientation, are nevertheless essentially divergent and therefore able potentially to lead to insights which are based on a range of epistemological premises.

Hammersley (1984) has persuasively argued that history and ethnography are often complementary in nature, each sharing in many instances "...a commitment to documenting 'in their terms' the perspectives of the people



involved in the events and settings they describe.” (p. 15). Hammersley is critical of ahistorical ethnographic scholarship as well as of that which is relatively atheoretical in approach, leading to the production of work which is essentially empiricist in nature (and thereby implying a reductive reading of the social world). Hammersley concedes that whilst such work “...has its virtues, it is ultimately indefensible...” since “...Description is never ‘pure’, a direct and unchallengeable representation of the world. All ‘facts’ involve theoretical assumptions...We neglect theory at our peril.” (p. 16). Equally, Hammersley is alive to the possibility of a dogmatic theoreticism and the attendant dangers.

The emergence of a postmodern intellectual climate (Bauman 1992) in the wake of the crisis and demise of Marxism renders the task of formulating a cohesive theoretically informed social history even more daunting than it might otherwise have been. To withdraw into the certitude of a positivist reading of events would be to ignore the complex processes which construct and constitute a curriculum and which influence the interactions of knowledge, learning experiences and actual *lives* which are touched by educational curricula. The main task here, it should be stressed, is not to develop a theory of curriculum development, but rather to create a history of aspects of a particular curriculum which also provides a theoretically informed account of it. In forming such an ambition Goodson’s (1984) advice that historical studies should “...seek to establish the ‘gradual and continuous’ nature of curriculum change...” (p. 27) is acknowledged as a sensible caution. It is for this reason that before moving to a direct consideration of BEC/BTEC

and of the BEC/BTEC curriculum, it will be necessary to explore not only the historical and ideological context of VET, but also to construct a theoretical framework through which the historical narrative might be given meaning.

### **The Structure of the Study**

The importance of macro-sociological influences on the development of educational systems and curricula (Archer 1979) is acknowledged within this study by a concern to relate the historical account constructed and the empirical data presented to sociological theory. The significance of history and of historical method within the context of ethnographically influenced studies has long been established (Goodson and Ball 1984; Hammersley 1984; Goodson 1985b; Edson 1988; Ross 1988). The placing of BEC/BTEC and of its curricula within a historical context is an important aim of this study. Following the work of Goodson (1985) and others associated with social histories of the school curriculum, this study will seek to create a theoretically informed account of the emergence, evolution, practices, and perceptions of a particular BTEC curriculum.

In Chapter 2 an introduction to the ideas of four distinct thinkers will be made in order to indicate the basis on which subsequent chapters will articulate a theoretical and historical contextualisation of the vocational curriculum based primarily, though far from exclusively, on a consideration of associated themes/concepts. The four thinkers in question are Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard. The work of both Gramsci and Althusser is explicitly Marxist, not only in its philosophical



position, but also in the sense of a very specifically political commitment and purpose. Whilst the thought of Gramsci is imbued with a strongly humanist ethic and subjectivist interpretation of social activity (Burrell and Morgan 1979), that of Althusser stands in sharp contrast in its objectivist stand-point and self-declared "theoretical anti-humanism" (as attributed by Althusser to the later period Marx) (Althusser 1969). Foucault, whose work suggests a fluid and deeply problematic epistemology, and therefore necessarily defies simple classification, may safely be characterised as "broadly post-structuralist". Thereby the inclusion of Foucault offers elements of ideological balance and critique as well as providing a means by which it is possible to consider power and control as forces in the experience of a curriculum at the micro level. Lyotard is an important philosopher of postmodernity who has considered the condition of knowledge in the late Twentieth Century (Lyotard 1984) and who, like Foucault, expressly rejects Marxism both as politics and as philosophy. It may therefore be considered that these four thinkers provide the opportunity to conduct a study which, whilst fundamentally *critical*, operationalises this stance through the employment of a multi-perspectival analysis. The rationale regarding the selection of these four will be further developed in the section *Four Thinkers* below.

Chapter 3 will attempt to provide an account of the historical development of vocational education in England. The aim here is not to provide a detailed history but rather to produce a broad panorama within which the subsequent account of BEC/BTEC (Chapter 5) and of the BEC/BTEC curriculum specifically (Chapter 6) may be contextualised. This will necessitate a brief

consideration of the function of schooling generally within society before moving to a discussion of the development of vocational education and training as a distinctive strand within educational provision. Both the economic/social context of VET and the evolution of its broad curricula forms will be briefly outlined.

Chapter 4, tracing developments within the sociology of education, will consider some fundamental concepts in curriculum discourse. This will serve as a preliminary to the subsequent analysis of the BEC/BTEC curriculum (Chapter 6) by clarifying some of the key terms which will be utilised. This will also afford the opportunity to explore important debates within the sociology of education which have direct relevance to a discussion of vocationalism and to the interpretation of a vocational curriculum. The chapter will also provide an account of developments in further education institutions and in the work of further education lecturers over the period during which the BEC/BTEC curriculum was implemented and operated. This is considered important in recognising the fact that BEC/BTEC courses were, at the operational level, contained in the wider college environment and that, as with human agents, they were in a mutually causal relationship with the factors which constituted colleges, staffrooms, and classrooms.

The fifth chapter will outline the inception and development of the Business Education Council (BEC), subsequently the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC), as the organisation which developed the range of curricula of which the National Diploma in Business and Finance was the

most popular and most influential component. An appreciation of this institutional history is necessary for an understanding of the forces which created the modern vocational curriculum in further education in England. BEC/BTEC has been a powerful agent for curriculum change and development and its direct influence on life within colleges was immense over two decades from the late 1970s. This chapter will provide an overview of how BEC/BTEC came into being as an awarding body and how its role as a progressive curriculum innovator was ultimately destroyed by the emergence of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ).

Chapter 6 will provide an account of the developing structure, philosophy and content of the BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance. Identifying three BEC/BTEC “generations” of the curriculum which appeared before the end of 1992, together with three subsequent NCVQ/QCA inspired GNVQ generations. It will review the developing BEC/BTEC philosophy, entry requirements, structure/design, content, skills focus, assessment regimes, implementation strategies, the prescribed teaching and learning methods, and the monitoring systems employed by BEC/BTEC.

Chapter 7 will present some views of various actors/participants in, and consumers of, BEC/BTEC programmes including employers, educators, careers advisers, and the students themselves. This empirical evidence has been largely collected through questionnaires, interviews, document analysis and participant observation. Questions designed to measure the ways in which respondents felt *others* valued BEC/BTEC programmes in relation to



work/higher education were used in order to produce reflective qualitative data which was underpinned, in some instances, by related quantitative data. The aim of the chapter is to present the views of BEC/BTEC held by a range of individuals who either directly or indirectly had experiences of the curriculum, and through the exposure of these views, to attempt to convey some of the strong opinions, ambivalent views and, on occasion, emotional/irrational responses which were expressed. There will be an attempt to analyse views obtained in relation to the academic status of BEC/BTEC; the extent to which the courses provided a useful preparation for employment and their acceptability to employers; and how far the courses gave students an effective preparation for higher education and found acceptance in the polytechnics and universities. The process of curriculum change relating to the introduction of BEC and subsequent BTEC transitions during the 1980s and 1990s, outlined in Chapter 6, will be specifically discussed in relation to the difficult problem of creating a positive image for these course. The full data, (both quantitative and qualitative), from which that appearing in this chapter was selected will be presented as *Appendix B*.

Chapter 8 will, using some ideas derived from Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault and Lyotard, provide an analytical discussion of a number of key characteristics of the BEC/BTEC curriculum and will consider the implications which arise. This will include an indication of means by which vocational curricula in further education might be modified in order to incorporate a stronger critical element of the kind which, it is argued, is both instrumentally desirable and culturally valued. This chapter, taken together with Chapter 2,



may be regarded as a kind of framing device, or a theoretical tenter, which connects and provides tension between the analytical strands which appear in and inform the accounts constructed in Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7.

### **Some Philosophical Considerations**

Though empiricism has long been the blight of English-speaking philosophy and social science, it is salutary to recall that it was once part of a great liberating movement of thought. This movement had many aspects in different spheres of life...each initially liberating, each flawed in much the same way and ending as an obstacle to understanding and emancipation.

(Collier 1994) (pp. 70 - 71)

What Mennell (1980) referred to as the "...controversy about positivism..." (p. 156) has subsequently heightened in intensity. Traditional conceptions of scientific objectivity, and of the nature of progress itself, have been brought into question by developments in philosophy and changes in the understanding of the basis of the natural sciences which long provided the template for researchers in the incipient and, in many eyes, academically less respectable social sciences (Sayer 1992). The most hostile critiques of positivism have, perhaps, been those which have emerged from theorists influenced by postmodernism and a number of such contributions have recently focused specifically on the realm of education (Parker 1997; Stronach and MacLure 1997; Usher, Bryant and Johnston 1997). The study of the curriculum which follows will not completely eschew empirical investigation within its chosen field, since it has been produced with the conviction that some methodological multi-dimensionality is useful in considering a subject and in making a case. On a more fundamental level, it

is accepted that the interface between theory and the empirical world is a crucial point of scrutiny. Nonetheless, the rejection *in principle* of positivism as philosophy, and therefore of its key tenets regarding method, is an important characteristic of this thesis. Having regard to this position, a discussion of the logic behind it needs to be elaborated through a consideration of some aspects of the case against positivism in the context of social scientific research.

It was primarily members of the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse) who, on their emigration to the United States in the 1930s, criticised the Durkheim and Comte influenced positivist sociology which dominated American scholarship. Mennell (1980) identifies the debate between Popper and Adorno at the *German Sociological Association* in 1961 as a key event during which Popper denied that "positivist" was an appropriate label for his work since he recognised that observation was "theory impregnated", whilst Adorno framed his objection to Popper's work in terms of its "scientism" (by way of privileging the logic of the natural sciences). Adorno's attack was subsequently further developed by Habermas who characterised the technical interest in control which positivists evinced as injurious to the practice of a critical social science with emancipatory potential.

Educational research takes place within the context of wider social research and cannot be immune from the discourses and paradigm shifts which are located there. The current intellectual environment, which is at once volatile and fragile, may at times engender a sense of provisionality borne of a

recognition that research is a social practice rather than a "technology" (Usher 1996). Kuhn's (1970) analysis of the practice of science established it as a community based enterprise in which paradigms are subject to periods of dominance followed by occasional "shifts" (scientific revolutions). Perhaps the key significance of Kuhn's work has been to underline the existence of a hermeneutic dimension in science. This may be considered a great service to research for, whilst it may remove the false comfort derived from "scientific certainty", it foregrounds the essentially problematic and subjective nature of what may count as knowledge.

Lather (1993) has specifically addressed validity in the social sciences in the context of contemporary postpositivism. A context where, according to Lyotard (1984), the writ of metanarratives no longer runs. If this seems too apocalyptic, it is difficult to deny the power of antifoundationalist critiques (West 1991) and the parallel crisis of representation. In such a climate it behoves the researcher to at least attempt to adopt a reflexive position but to be under no illusion as to how this might be distorted by whatever "regime of truth" may be subsequently articulated.

### **The Participant Observer as Invisible Researcher**

Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) have suggested that "...there is a sense in which all social researchers are participant observers..." (p.1) before going on to state that they would not wish to make any "hard and fast" distinctions between ethnography and other kinds of qualitative research. This declaration

effectively endorses the suggestion made in the introduction to the contribution from Miles and Huberman (1994) that

...the terms *ethnography, field methods, qualitative inquiry, participant observation, case study, naturalistic methods, and responsive evaluation* have become practically synonymous.

(p. 1) [italics in original]

The authors go on to assert that In the context of qualitative research "...little standardized instrumentation is used at the outset. The researcher is essentially the main 'measurement device' in the study." (p. 7). Robson (1993) considers "participant observation" as characterising a mode of research whereby the researcher seeks to become a member of the observed group. In classifying the types of participant observer he identifies the "complete participant" as a researcher who becomes a full member of the observed group by means of concealing their research activity from the group. The "participant as observer", however, would reveal their role as a researcher from the onset and would then go on to seek to establish close relationships with group members in order to fully gain their trust. The "marginal participant" would adopt a passive role whilst observing in a (hopefully) low key way in order to minimise distortion factors arising from their presence. Further down this continuum, the "observer-as-participant" would seek to take no part of any kind in the activity of the group observed. The way in which the technique of participant observation has contributed to this study began less consciously than any of the preceding categories, for the roots of this research project were practically subliminal and may be traced back to 1978 when the author started work as a further education lecturer teaching in a large Business Studies Department.



In addition to the inevitable subjectivity which must be inherent in any interpretation of types of historical evidence, be they "histories", social documents (such as curricula), or contemporary accounts derived from actors in the processes and events considered, it is important to acknowledge the intersubjective relationship which exists between research and the subject. This has been characterised, within the study of ideas and social phenomena, as a "double hermeneutic" (Sayer 1992 p. 35). According to Pickering (1997) the impossibility of researchers escaping from their personal social and historical experience

...is not something to be regretted or denied, as it would from an empiricist epistemological stance, but on the contrary...it must be acknowledged as unavoidable and worked with instead of against in attempts to make it a methodological asset rather than obstacle.

(p. 148)

Given the technical nature of the term hermeneutics and the possible misconceptions which might arise from its use, a brief discussion of the way in which it is being deployed in this study is likely to be of benefit. The hermeneutical process involves the "reading" of a social situation, similar to the reading of a book in that it involves a complex range of preunderstandings and skills, in order to produce a particular form of understanding (which some methodologists term "*verstehen*"). Sayer (1992) has pointed to the common suggestion that in understanding people it is necessary to "empathise" with them: he argues that this notion, in asserting the subjective-objective dualism, collapses into subjective opinions and feelings which are deeply antithetical to an interpretation of meaning which is not only self-aware but also rigorous, that is an interpretation which involves thinking "...*about* beliefs and concepts as well as *with* them." (p. 37). For Sayer *verstehen* is a universal concept,

applying to both the single hermeneutical practice deployed in the study of nature and in the double hermeneutic which arises in the study of society. Notwithstanding this universality, Sayer suggests that "...although *verstehen* is common to knowledge in any context, it does not take the same form in each." (p. 38). Moreover, it is often shared *mis*-understandings and ambiguities rather than understandings and "facts" which constitute social structure and products and which enable their relative stability.

At this juncture, as a means of exposing something of "the roots" of this study which were referred to above, as well as bringing into the open the inevitable biographical and situational factors which will influence it, some brief autobiographical notes relating to the author, concentrating on his relationship to the BEC/BTEC curriculum, will be provided below. Departing from academic convention, but recognising and emphasising the personal dimension of this part of the study, it will be written in the first person.

#### *Some Autobiographical Notes*

*Having graduated in 1974 I worked in the Electricity Supply Industry for four years, latterly being involved in the training of young clerical and administrative workers. In 1978 I joined the Business Studies Department of a large Technical College in the North of England. The staple curricula were the then long established Ordinary National Diploma (OND) in Business Studies and the Certificate in Office Studies (COS). However, a new course was on offer that year - the Business Education Council (BEC) General Certificate, and*

*this, together with the "old" courses, featured on my first timetable. The following year would see the introduction of the BEC [later BTEC] National level courses which replaced the OND. The staff rooms were filled with an air of uncertainty and resentment as established ways of working were threatened by a new curriculum with its own very "different" philosophy. My experienced colleagues who I had hoped might provide me as a new, (and then untrained), teacher with guidance were themselves strangely disorientated by the new imperatives of BEC.*

*What was so different about BEC? A key change, it emerged, was an emphasis on collaborative curriculum development, the need for which grew out of the way in which the new curriculum sought to integrate the standard disciplines of Economics, Law and Accountancy. Staff who were used to working virtually as independent professionals within their respective subject specialisms, sharing an office but each maintaining a locked cupboard of personal and sacrosanct handouts were now being forced to write "Cross Modular Assignments" and to generate materials collectively. To add to this new mode of production there was now a prescribed form of delivery and a new associated buzz term - "student-centred". Those with a fondness for formal lecturing and straight dictation were appalled and, over the next few years, many would opt for early retirement. Leaving speeches would often include a side swipe at the new courses which had, it would be claimed, lowered academic standards and ushered in a new kind of student who would never have been allowed near college in the "good old days".*



As someone who had started to teach at precisely the point when BEC came on the vocational education scene I was, perhaps, more easily able to adapt than most. In 1982, after what was effectively a four year apprenticeship which included gaining an In-Service Certificate in Education, I was passed what was widely regarded within the Department as the poisoned chalice of promotion to the post of BEC Courses Co-ordinator. I was now the "BEC Man", responsible for liaison with external moderators from the Awarding Body, for our compliance with BEC's edicts, and generally expected by my Head of Department to get on with proselytising the philosophy of BEC to a large team of staff, many of whom were still highly resistant to the message. I held this position for the next 8 years, during which the BEC/BTEC curriculum went through a series of developmental changes which were accompanied by a staff realisation that now, whatever things had been like before 1978, change would be a permanent condition of working as a lecturer in vocational education. The "old days" were never going to return, and even "these days" were probably numbered.

Whilst working at the chalk-face and continuing my "BEC Man" activities I had developed an interest in education theory which led me first to a Master of Science degree in Education and then, in the context of a Master of Philosophy degree, to subsequent research in a theoretical aspect of the sociology of education. Up to this point I had laboured under the delusion that, so far as my own advanced studies in education were concerned, theoretical abstraction was



*an important indicator of quality. Following an encounter with Paul Willis's (1977) influential Learning to Labour study I finally realised that I had, in a sense, been living in a kind of educational research laboratory (as all teachers do). From that point I recognised that the point of theory was to interpret, to explain and to make sense of lived experience and that my daily working life as a Business Studies lecturer, which I had previously considered to be far removed from the world of scholarship, was actually a proper and fascinating focus for my thinking rather than a distraction from it. Eureka! It was at that point that this study moved from its "subliminal" to its conscious phase.*

*In 1992 I obtained a two year contract as a teacher trainer. This enabled me to work with intending further education lecturers on pre-service Postgraduate Certificate in Education programmes and to utilise my recent and deep experience of the BEC/BTEC curriculum in preparing them for the classroom. I was also, through my work assessing their teaching practice lessons, able to visit a wide range of colleges, observe a good number of BTEC classes in action, and, on occasion, "talk shop" with the FE lecturers who were mentoring the trainee lecturers. Inevitably the vocational curriculum was changing again, this time almost as profoundly as before through the phased introduction of General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs), and I faced the uncomfortable prospect of knowing this latest generation of vocational courses on a "second hand" basis. I need not have worried. My teacher training contract was not renewed and I re-entered further education into what was now a "Brave New World" of post-incorporation Colleges where I was to spend*

*the next eighteen months delivering and internally verifying GNVQ programmes before returning to higher education. My enforced sojourn in FE was, in retrospect, vital in allowing me to gain an "insider's" view of GNVQs. This also meant that I had been able to work in both the pre-BEC/BTEC and, what was, in effect, the post BEC/BTEC periods of FE Business Studies, as well as having taught throughout the BEC/BTEC years.*

*My intention in creating the above passages was primarily to clarify my relationship to BEC/BTEC programmes and my associated formative experience together with its bearing on the nature of this research. I started to undertake small research projects within my college on such issues as what local employers thought about BTEC courses, and I conducted evaluation exercises to find out the views of BTEC students. From about 1990 the great majority of my colleagues in FE were aware that I was doing some research, something to do with BTEC, but this for them was not a major or, I think, even a minor consideration. It was simply obscured by my work and relationships with them as a colleague rather than as a researcher. In this respect I was, perhaps, something very near to Robson's (1993) participant observation research category of "complete participant". I believe that in something over fifteen years as a teacher working directly with BEC/BTEC programmes, students, and representatives (moderators/verifiers) I have been in a highly privileged position to learn about the vocational curriculum as it has unfolded and been implemented in practice. I remain conscious, however, of the need to maintain a*

*rigorous approach and to apply "outside" perspectives in order to interrogate and develop my understanding and analysis.*

## **Critical Realism, Critical Theory, and Postmodernism**

"Critical Realism" is associated primarily with the work of the social philosopher Roy Bhaskar. Collier (1994) points to the genesis of the concept in an elision of the terms *transcendental realism* (referring to Bhaskar's philosophy of science) and *critical naturalism* (referring to the human sciences). Bhaskar uses the term "empirical realism" to denote not the notion that concrete objects are real, but rather to encapsulate the denial of the reality of underlying mechanisms

...which don't appear in experience, but [which] cause phenomena that do. A transcendental realist, by contrast, is one who claims that such mechanisms can be shown to be real by transcendental arguments...

(p. 26).

Sayer (1992) suggests that realism is a philosophy rather than a substantive social theory, and identifies amongst its fundamental tenets the following notions:

- The world exists independent of our knowledge of it;
- Our knowledge of the world is fallible and theory laden...;
- The world is differentiated and stratified, consisting not only of events, but objects, including structures, which have powers and liabilities capable of generating events...;
- Social phenomena such as actions, texts and institutions are concept-dependent...;
- Science or the production of any other kind of knowledge is a social practice...;
- Social science must be critical of its object. In order to be able to explain and understand social phenomena we have to evaluate them critically.

(pp. 6 - 7)



Whilst the study which follows is not one which fits fully within the territory of Critical Realism as a political and intellectual project it is, nonetheless, one which is underpinned by the principles indicated by the above statements. To that extent it is important to acknowledge the influence of Critical Realism in informing and shaping this work.

In attempting to present a critically informed socio-historical account of a curriculum (which could easily seem to take on the form of a collage or fragmented but multi-layered narrative), this study might well fall prey to the kind of methodological charge represented by Blaug's (1980) attack on "storytelling". This, quoted in Sayer (1992), will be reproduced below together with, at some length, Sayer's response;

...what historians call *colligation*, the binding together of facts, low level generalizations, high-level theories, and value judgements in a coherent narrative, held together by the glue of an implicit set of beliefs and attitudes that the author shares with all his readers. In able hands it can be extremely persuasive, and yet it is never easy to explain afterwards why it has persuaded...because storytelling lacks rigour, lacks a definite logical structure, it is all too easy to verify and virtually impossible to falsify. [Blaug]

#### [Response from Sayer...]

Several phrases in this passage suggest a comprehensive misunderstanding of the relationship between theory and empirical research. Given the nature of an open system event or transformation... **[such as an educational curriculum]** ...one wonders what a rigorous, 'logical' deductive explanation would look like! Is Blaug suggesting that users of other approaches - deductive or whatever - do not also make value judgements or rely upon the 'glue of an implicit set of beliefs and attitudes?; or does he suppose that explanation can take place without an hermeneutic circle or context? If one is unaware of the existence of qualitative methods such as structural analysis and the 'cross-gridding' or 'triangulation' of interpretive analysis, and if one imagines that events can only be explained by deducing them from statements about universal



regularities, then the nuances of 'storytelling' will indeed seem baffling. And if one is unaware of the relationship between abstract and concrete, it will always seem vulnerable to naive falsification. Certainly evaluation of this kind of study is not straightforward, but then there is a huge difference between this and testing a theoretical claim about a particular phenomenon under controlled experimental conditions. To arrive at reasonable expectations of social research we must take account of the kinds of things it has to explain.

Sayer (p. 251) [emboldened italicised statement not in original]

It is from Sayer's final proposition above, and the implications of this for the development of a meaningful analysis of a curriculum, (which is so patently a product and, today, no less obviously a *commodity*), that the need to employ critical perspectives is seen as fundamental to this study. In addition to being located within the *spirit* of critical theory (as elaborated by and primarily associated with the Frankfurt School of social theorists), the study will specifically attempt to apply to its subject the ideas of four thinkers who have each being massively influential in the field of contemporary social philosophy/theory. These are, as indicated above, Antonio Gramsci, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard. The choice of these four may well be regarded as somewhat eclectic, if not theoretically promiscuous. Each of these writers has been selected for consideration here because of the way in which it is possible to apply some aspect of their thought in such a way as to either deepen or draw out some characteristics of the modern (and postmodern) vocational curriculum. They have also been selected on the basis of the potential which they hold for the generation of a multi-perspectival analysis which will have a linear progression propelled in part by particular connections which will be made, as well as by the sometimes ostensibly uncomfortable differences and discontinuities which, it

is hoped, can be turned to advantage. Rather than adding “pure” theory to an empirically based account, the intention is to use the theorists selected in order to interrogate given, and also guard against the formulation of, “common sense” understandings.

The implications of postmodernism for a study of the vocational curriculum are potentially profound and will need to be explicitly addressed at various stages in the chapters which follow. On one level there is the issue of how a form of curriculum based on modernist notions of progress and instrumentality might contribute to an understanding of a world which (from the postmodernist perspective) has been fundamentally decentred and fragmented by new modes of production and communication (Usher, Bryant and Johnston 1997). The methodological implications of postmodernism derive from the vital epistemological issues which stem from its challenge to universalist conceptions of the world. Postmodernism, it will be argued, asks some important questions and postmodernists have contributed interesting and often powerful insights. The work of one of these, Lyotard, will be discussed in relation to the vocational curriculum. Aspects of postmodern thought will doubtless be apparent in many of the arguments which will appear in this study. Notwithstanding this, it is as well to make clear at this early stage that the essential relativism with which the postmodern project has been charged (see, for example, Eagleton 1996) is rejected.

## Four Thinkers

A discussion and contextualisation of the work of each of four thinkers to be utilised within this study will be provided in Chapter 2, it is appropriate, however, to provide some brief details of each of the individuals concerned together with a rationale for their inclusion whilst dealing with methodological issues. Moreover, the methodological implications which would arise from a direct association with the philosophical position of each of the four will be briefly considered here. *Table 1* below provides outline information:

[see over]

Table 1: Four Thinkers		
Antonio Gramsci	Born 1891 in Italy.	Died 1937.
<p>A "Radical Humanist" within the Marxist Tradition.</p> <p>Has been defined as a <i>critical theorist</i> (Boggs 1976 p. 32)</p> <p>A leader of the Italian Communist Party and an active revolutionary.</p> <p>Key concepts: <i>Praxis. Ideological hegemony</i></p>		
Louis Althusser	Born 1918 in Algeria.	Died 1990.
<p>One of the leading post-war Marxist philosophers.</p> <p>A member of the French Communist Party and often described as Stalinist in his politics.</p> <p>Anti-Humanist. Determinist.</p> <p>Key concepts: <i>Overdetermination. Ideological State Apparatus.</i></p>		
Michel Foucault	Born at Poitiers, France in 1926.	Died 1984.
<p>A social theorist who is notoriously difficult to classify, though generally regarded as post-structuralist. Recognising a debt to Marx but not a Marxist.</p> <p>Key concepts: <i>Discursive practice. Genealogy. Technology.</i></p>		
Jean-François Lyotard	Born at Versailles, France in 1924.	Died 1998.
<p>"...the non-Marxist philosopher of postmodernity" (Lechte 1994 p. 246).</p> <p>Rejected Marxism in the early 1970s. Influences include Freud (libidinal energy), Wittgenstein (language games), and Kant (the <i>sublime</i>, unrepresentable, aspect of history).</p> <p>Key concepts: <i>Libidinal economy. The end of metanarratives. Performativity.</i></p>		

Each of the four may fairly be regarded as a major figure in Twentieth Century thought, and each of them is contemporaneous with the others, if not strictly chronologically, then at least in the sense of occupying the same broad field



of "continental philosophy". Two are Marxists; two are antithetical to that tradition. Each has articulated an intellectual vision/position which is sufficiently developed to be a hugely formative element within their respective tradition. Any attempt to reconcile their thoughts one to the other, or to distill them into a single theory, would be both inappropriate to the study and foolhardy. They appear here *because* of their differences and the consequent opportunities for a multi-perspectival analysis which will contextualise the empirical evidence presented.

Gramsci, in enunciating his particular notion of *praxis*, emphasised the unity of theory and practice. For Gramsci reality is not a concrete conception in the materialist tradition of the mature work of Marx, but rather exists in relation to those who modify it. This reflects the objective idealism of critical theory (Burrell and Morgan 1979). A researcher in the Gramscian tradition would need to work pragmatically "on the ground" with a practical involvement which incorporated an overtly political and revolutionary consciousness. Althusser, whilst sharing Gramsci's political commitment, stands directly opposed to Gramsci in propounding an anti-subjectivist materialism. Burrell and Morgan (1979) suggest that,

Ontologically, he [Althusser] is a realist, but the real world can only be understood through theory, which need not be located or rooted in reality at all. Epistemologically, in seeking 'scientific' knowledge outside ideology, he is a positivist, though not of an extreme kind, since he totally rejects empiricism. (p. 345)

For Foucault history is always a "history of the present". In deploying the term "genealogy" Foucault sees history as an intervention in the present (Lechte

1994) and epistemology is the means by which changes in the production of knowledge may be revealed. These ideas have particular significance in relation to a study which purports to provide a historical perspective on a curriculum (knowledge) in a timeframe which is the near past and the present. Foucault's work suggests the importance of both discourse and power in the analysis of social relations. Postmodernism as a perspective can be recognised as partially derived from the post-structuralist thinking of which Foucault, along with Derrida, is a foremost architect (Bloland 1995). In the context of this study Foucault may be regarded as a bridge between the structuralism of Gramsci and Althusser and the postmodernism of Lyotard. Lyotard, announcing the existence of a growing "incredulity towards legitimating metanarratives" suggests that science can now best be understood as a form of "language game". Lechte (1994) summarises Lyotard's thinking in relation to this as follows:-

1. Only denotative (descriptive) statements are scientific.
2. Scientific statements are quite different from those (concerned with origins) constituting the social bond.
3. Competence is only required on the part of the sender of the scientific message, not on the part of the receiver.
4. A scientific statement only exists within a series of statements which are validated by argument and proof.
5. in the light of (4), the scientific language game requires a knowledge of the existing state of scientific knowledge. Science no longer requires a narrative for its legislation, for the rules of science are immanent in its game.

...Technology...follows the principle of optimal performance: maximum output for minimum input. Lyotard calls this the principle of 'performativity'... (pp. 246-247)

Lyotard argues that the emerging postmodern paradigm, bearing as it does characteristics of uncertainty, unpredictability, catastrophe, chaos and

dissensus offers a profound challenge to the modernist epistemology. Lyotard suggests that a universal approach to history is not possible since there is a plurality of universes; "regimes of phrases" and "genres of discourse" abound. Something of this logic is reflected in the curriculum history which is being constructed here, for it is recognised that postmodernism provides a persuasive description of the surface of the world and of the condition of knowledge which describes it.

The Lyotardian notion of legitimation by paralogy is one which has had a methodological influence on the structure of this study. If the choice of Althusser, Gramsci, Foucault and Lyotard is one which has been made on the basis of certain continuities and pragmatic utilities, it is also one which gives rise to certain ostensibly "difficult" discontinuities and incompatibilities. Lyotardian paralogy eschews the Habermasian "drive for consensus" (Lather 1993) in order to "...foster differences and let contradictions remain in tension." (p. 679). Paralogy refuses closure. In the context of this study, the four chosen thinkers have sufficient relationship for an intelligible and coherent discourse to be created, but that an element of incommensurability is present is not only acknowledged but is an important part of the rationale for their inclusion.

## **The Sample**

Wolcott (1990) has pointed to the importance in qualitative research not of accumulating all the evidence which could possibly be obtained, but rather of selectively discarding most of the data collected (given that there is sufficient



rich data to do so). There is also a need for judicious pre-editing in terms of deciding which sources/actors/agents should be incorporated within any kind of history. Myriad opportunities exist for the generation and collection of data and choices have to be made with regard to the range and depth of engagement with records in the form of texts (primary and secondary documents), and in relatively unmediated responses in the form of statements which represent the views of individuals who have direct or indirect experience of the subject of the study.

The vocational curriculum, as with any others, touches a large range of people who may be broadly termed "stakeholders" or "consumers" (either directly or indirectly). Each of these individuals has, potentially, a story to tell. Each group or category has its own particular set of values and interests whether these are fully articulated (as with professional bodies), or relatively amorphous (as with, say, ex-BTEC students). In formulating a sampling strategy for a questionnaire survey to be conducted in order to access relevant views it was necessary to identify the appropriate key groups who would be likely to have either general or specific insights arising from their experience(s) of the BTEC curriculum. Robson (1993) has pointed to the polarity of research opinion regarding the usefulness of surveys and identifies the problem of questionnaire design as crucial to the internal validity of a study conducted in this way. For the purpose of this study a range of questionnaires was designed bearing a common presentational framework but with some variation in questions according to the specific part of the survey population they were to be used for. Some items allowed a

quantitative response using a five point Likert scale (see over) (Robson 1993). However, a feature of the design was to allow space for and encourage relatively extended written responses. A prototype questionnaire for further education lecturers was piloted using six student teachers and two further education lecturers as a design focus group; this was then modified in the light of the advice received and the general format was used as a model which, with appropriate adaptations, was utilised for the related questionnaires used in the survey. A complete set of samples of the questionnaires used can be found at *Appendix A*.

The questionnaires were distributed on the basis of obtaining a stratified random sample derived from respondents in the following broad categories and more specific sub-categories as indicated in *Table 2* below:-

**[see over]**

Table 2 - Populations Sampled in Survey of Perceptions of BTEC National in Business and Finance		
Category	Sub-category	Number of Responses Obtained
1. Educators	-	83
	1.1 FE Lecturers	30
	1.2 HE Lecturers	20
	1.3 HE Admission Tutors	12
	1.2 + 1.3	32
	1.4 Student FE Lecturers	11
	1.5 Sixth Form College Teachers	10
2. Employment Related	-	44
	2.1 Employers	28
	2.2 Professional Body Representatives	8
	2.3 Careers Advisers	8
3. GCE A Level School Students	-	40
4. BTEC National Students	-	60
5. Former BTEC National Students	-	154
	5.1 Pre-1987	80
	5.2 Post-1987	74
TOTAL		381

A standard five point scale was used for responses to a number of variables, the format of which is illustrated by the example below:-

**EXAMPLE Variable 4**

How do you rate the BTEC National Course as a practical preparation for employment? (please circle a number below)				
1	2	3	4	5
v. low	low	OK	high	v. high
ANY COMMENTS:				



Cohen and Mannion (1980) recommend a minimum sample size of 30 if data is to be subjected to statistical analysis and, whilst this has not been achieved in all sub-categories, this target has been comfortably exceeded in each of the major categories utilised in the study. The overall sample represents a relatively rich source of quantitative and qualitative data which provides significant scope for some comparison between sub-groups.

Educators were incorporated into the sample on the basis that they have professional knowledge of curricula and experience of the implementation. The further education lecturers and further education student teachers all had direct experience of working with BTEC programmes and students. Some higher education lecturers and admissions tutors had experience of teaching on BTEC Higher Programmes, and a few had taught on the National Level programmes before moving into HE. The inclusion of higher education staff in the sample, however, was primarily to ascertain their views as "gatekeepers" and as people who were working with former BTEC National students who had entered higher education. A small group of Sixth Form College teachers were included to provide a counterpoint from an institution which had a strong traditional academic culture based on GCE Advanced Level programmes.

With vocational curricula the relevance of the views of employers and employment related individuals, such as representatives of professional bodies and careers advisers, becomes intensified in that the programmes are

designed with the needs of employers specifically in mind. This makes the question of credibility in the employment related sector particularly critical.

The views of BTEC and former BEC/BTEC students as consumers of the curriculum were considered to be important in that they had the most recent (or current) experience of the associated content/learning and strategies and were able to speak directly of their encounter with the programmes. In addition, each of these students necessarily has a psychological self concept (Burns 1979) as a BEC/BTEC, or former BEC/BTEC, student. This is constituted on the basis of their direct perceptions of what it means to be "doing a BTEC" (or to hold a BEC/BTEC award) as well as from the messages which they receive from their interactions with lecturers (FE and HE), school teachers, employers and potential employers. The views of General Certificate in Education (GCE) Advanced Level students regarding BTEC have also been incorporated because these individuals had chosen to study the established qualification against which BTEC programmes were inevitably compared, and also in order to gain some impression of how they perceive students who have opted for the vocational alternative.

## Triangulation

...triangular techniques in the social sciences attempt to map out, or explain more fully, the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one stand-point and, in so doing, by making use of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Cohen and Mannion (1980) (p. 208)

Miles and Huberman (1994) have added some specificity to the above basic definition by outlining the development of the use of triangulation in research, referring to some of the analytical problems which may arise from contradiction, and [following Denzin (1978)] identifying several primary kinds of triangulation. These are described as

...triangulation by *data source* (which can include persons, times, places, etc.), by *method* (observation, interview document), by *researcher* (investigator A, B, etc.), [ ... ] by *theory* [ ...and by...] *data type* (qualitative text, recordings, quantitative). (p. 267)

The study which follows will attempt to maximise the element of triangulation by addressing each of the above potential categories. The data sources, as indicated, will include a series of different stakeholder/interest groups associated with the BTEC curriculum. The methods employed will include "desk research", survey by questionnaire, interviewing, document analysis, and an element of participant observation. Related studies undertaken by other researchers in the fields of vocational education/curriculum history/sociology of education will be identified and discussed. An element of theoretical triangulation will be achieved through the consideration of perspectives from different critical traditions which operate at both the macro and micro levels of social interaction (see the section *Four Thinkers* above). It should be noted that this differs from the concept of paralogy, which is also an element of this study, in that it is based on the identification of



agreements/similarities rather than the tolerance of incommensurable difference. Although the data used will be primarily qualitative in nature some quantitative data will be generated through Likert scale items in the questionnaires.

## **In Summary**

What follows is a historical study of a curriculum. The methodology employed is primarily the document based form of enquiry which is traditionally associated with the work of a historian. This, however, has been supplemented and enriched by the use of insights gained from participant observation, a questionnaire survey, and some interviewing. To this extent the overall methodology bears some hallmarks of the ethnographic/qualitative techniques which have evolved in the social sciences. This chapter has attempted to provide an outline of the study and an indication of the philosophical foundation on which it rests. More methodological detail will be provided at appropriate points in subsequent chapters.

## Chapter Two

### THEORETICALLY CONTEXTUALISING THE BTEC CURRICULUM

#### Introduction

Theorising in relation to such a complex social product as a curriculum is a task which must necessarily be circumscribed. Recent and current educational practice is substantially a product of modernity, based as it is on social developments within a period of unprecedented economic progress and administrative rationalisation. This was an era which witnessed the creation of capitalist nation states in the wake of the massive productive power unleashed by the Industrial Revolution, as well as that of the intellectual force of the Enlightenment formulated by Eighteenth Century European philosophers. Education as a practice is, however, situated within a contemporary social context where the definition "Postmodern" has enjoyed great currency. A discussion of postmodernism and the context which gave birth to it would inevitably involve a consideration of the work of various continental theorists belonging to the structuralist and, more particularly, post-structuralist schools. The published literature in relation to the broad field of postmodernism is considerable; two well regarded introductory texts are those provided by Sarup (1993) and Storey (1993). Also useful at the introductory level are a number of collections of key contributions which have been produced with a view to providing both a historical overview and familiarity with some of the more accessible work of the key thinkers within the field (see Docherty 1993; Storey 1994; Munns and Rajan 1995). More demanding, but more rewarding, are Jameson's (1991) *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* and Bauman's (1992) *Intimations of*

*Postmodernity*. Usher and Edwards (1994) have provided an introduction to postmodern theory which is concerned specifically with education, whilst Stronach and MacLure (1997) have considered postmodern discourses in relation to educational research. Critiques of postmodernism have been provided by Callinicos (1989) and Eagleton (1996).

Given the centrality of educational processes within the civil life of society, and also in the sphere of the *personal*, there is a sense in which all social theory has a relation to the study of a curriculum. As a consequence of this the work of a very wide range of writers might reasonably be discussed here, however, whilst several of these will be referred to in due course, there will be a particular focus on the work of just four; these are Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault and Lyotard. The primary criterion for the selection of these four specifically, as outlined in Chapter 1, is that they represent markedly different perspectives and thereby collectively offer the prospect of throwing some light on distinct aspects of the curriculum. They also have, because of their differences, a particular potential for linkages to be made in such a way as to enable the creation of a linear narrative which will facilitate a theoretically informed account of the vocational curriculum. It must be acknowledged that in choosing these four there was an element of the (seeming) serendipity which inevitably intrudes in the academic endeavours of any individual and which subsequently influences their thinking. Unexpected linkages occur *as if* by chance, though closer examination of the intellectual routes taken will generally reveal some form of coherence/investigative logic.

Gramsci, the earliest of these thinkers, might be broadly categorised as a "Radical Humanist" (Burrell and Morgan 1979); Althusser belongs firmly to the Structuralist tradition (ibid.); Foucault has been widely recognised as a major figure in the postmodern arena, and whilst he is notoriously difficult to classify (Sheridan 1980), he might reasonably be described as a post-structuralist (Lechte 1994). Lyotard is a central contributor to the debate surrounding the meaning of postmodernity (ibid.). None of these four were *primarily* concerned with vocational education, or, indeed, with education in the more general sense. Each of them, however, developed ideas which can be directly applied to issues arising from a contemporary consideration of the vocational curriculum. In this chapter there will be a relatively extended discussion of Gramsci, on the basis that aspects of his work have particular contextualising potential. The relevant ideas of Althusser, Foucault and Lyotard will be introduced as a preliminary to further discussion, in varying degrees, in subsequent chapters (and particularly in Chapter 8).

### **Gramsci and Vocational Education**

The ideas of the Italian Marxist political leader and theoretician Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) have, since the 1960s, been subject to a wide variety of reinterpretations and applications (Boggs 1976; Joll 1977; Ransome 1992). Indeed, Richard Hoggart (1995) has pointed out that Gramsci's name is one of those, like Foucault's, which has tended to be invoked as a kind of talisman and it is acknowledged here that the currency of Gramsci may, in some fields, have been somewhat devalued by indiscriminate use. Similar views have been expressed by Harris (1992a). It is therefore necessary to



provide a contextual rationale for this attempt to examine ways in which the incontestably rich legacy of Gramsci might be usefully employed in discussion of relatively recent technological developments and nascent cultural transformations, (which will undoubtedly have a global impact on the future of vocational education and training). Whilst the discussion which follows is grounded in what is a specifically British, and, in certain particulars, English experience, it is considered that the issues explored will have international resonance in that they arise from global economic and cultural transformations.

Forgacs (1989) has discussed the various ways in which Gramsci's ideas have been employed in Britain, referring specifically to their utility in interpreting Thatcherism and in explaining the crisis of the Left since the mid-1970s. Forgacs usefully draws attention to a quite fundamental "temporal and cultural gap" (p. 72) between the context in which Gramsci's ideas were produced (Italy and the inter-war struggle against Fascism), and that into which they were first received in the Anglophone World (a post-war Labourist Britain). A practical consequence of this has been that much of Gramsci's work has been regarded as effectively "unreadable", whilst other parts have been uprooted and redeployed from time to time in various ways. One particular instance of this apparent tendency for *ad hoc* application of Gramsci's thinking was the appearance, congruent with the dawn of "Thatcherism" in Britain, of Harold Entwistle's (1979) intriguingly titled *Antonio Gramsci: Conservative Schooling for Radical Politics*, (which will subsequently feature in this discussion). Forgacs (1989) convincingly narrates the

transition of Gramsci's status in Britain from a relatively obscure Mediterranean political figure when his work first appeared in English in 1957, to that of a major theorist and intellectual icon of the "New Left" by the late 1970s (the key text *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* English language edition having first appeared in 1971 [Gramsci 1971]).

Gramsci's influences were diverse, ranging from the anti-positivism of the Italian idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce together with the Eighteenth Century Neapolitan forerunner of historicism Giambattista Vico, through to Hegel and Marx, and beyond to The Futurists (Joll 1977). From this cocktail of ideas Gramsci distilled a personal concern with a rich conception of culture and a resolute opposition to crude forms of historical materialism. Whilst Croce's philological position was focused primarily on the spirit and, as such, could be politically detached, Gramsci was a committed activist who strongly adhered to the philosophical notion of *praxis*. The particular theoretical formulation with which Gramsci's name is most commonly associated is that of hegemony; and much of his emphasis on the importance of education arises from this concept and the contingent problem of how to build a counter-hegemonic, and ultimately hegemonic, socialist culture (Buci-Glucksmann 1980; Laclau and Mouffe 1985).

Entwistle's (1979) controversial study of Gramsci, referred to above, was an attempt to resolve the apparent contradiction of a revolutionary social theorist and political leader who, on Entwistle's reading, espoused a highly traditional curriculum and pedagogy. Gramsci certainly valued discipline in learning, and



attacked the nominally "progressive" educational reform programme proposed by Mussolini's regime. However, Entwistle's characterisation of Gramsci as an educational conservative was bitterly, (and convincingly), disputed by influential "Gramsci scholars" (Giroux, Holly and Hoare 1980). Gramsci, it should be remembered, was writing in the context of 1920s Italy. More specifically, he was, during the time in which his mature work was produced, an intern in a Fascist prison. According to the editors of his *Prison Notebooks* some of his writings were specifically calculated to "trick" the authorities ["The apparently 'conservative' eulogy of the old curriculum in fact often represents a device to circumvent the prison censor..." editors' note from Gramsci 1971 p. 24]. If this assertion appears to be a somewhat contrived attempt to reconcile some uncomfortable contradictions, as was subsequently conceded (Giroux, Holly and Hoare 1980 p. 323), it also effectively subverts attempts at making some form of definitive interpretation.

### *Theorising Social Relations in a Diffuse Culture*

In reacting against the apparent inadequacies of a Marxism predicated on a simplistic connection between the economic base of society and its "superstructural" elements, (politics/ideology/religion/culture/educational and legal systems), Gramsci developed a theory which recognised that a mature conceptualization of societal change would need to account for the complexities of any historical moment; complexities which went beyond purely economic determinants. Boggs (1976) suggests that by hegemony Gramsci

...meant the permeation throughout civil society (...) of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, morality that is in one way or another supportive of the established order and the class interests that dominate it. (p. 39)

Hegemony refers to a world view, a set of assumptions, through which a social class is able to exert its dominance (Sharp 1980), though this dominance is always open to challenge and, therefore, has to be continually reproduced (Willis 1977; Sarup 1982; Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Here then is a theory of power relations which, as Bauman (1992) acknowledged, has been enormously influential in shaping the intellectual landscape of the late Twentieth Century. This has been expressed as a sense of "culture as praxis", of reality "...as something flexible and fluid..." (ibid. p. 206). Gramsci (1971) referred to

...the "spontaneous" consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is "historically" caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.  
(p. 12)

In this way the ideas and values of the dominant group become accepted as "common sense". Hegemony is a broad term, most properly used with regard to a "whole society". The related term "settlement" has been employed specifically with regard to the inherently unstable balance of cultural/political forces within the sphere of education (Education Group 1981; Avis 1993a and 1993b).

Gramsci identified America as the society where capitalist hegemony was most strongly established. This was attributed partly to its rapid adoption of the form of industrial management techniques based on scientific principles and generally known as "Taylorism", (following the popularisation of such ideas by the early "management guru" Frederick Winslow Taylor); and, partly, to the fact that America was a society untrammelled by a legacy of



medievalism (Gramsci 1971 p. 285). The subsequent rise of America as a economic, military, and *cultural* 'Superpower', together with the collapse of the Soviet Union, lends Gramsci's argument particular force within the context of a postmodern worldview. There is, however, despite this prescience, a potential difficulty which arises from the historical location of Gramsci's thought in an agrarian and fundamentally peasant society. Gramsci was looking out at a changing World order in which he very clearly recognised the economic and social potency of Fordism, that is the system of mass production of standardised products then exemplified by the assembly lines of the Ford Motor Corporation [see *Americanism and Fordism* in Gramsci (1971)]. The difficulty referred to is the extent to which an analysis which anticipates in some important ways the influence of Fordism might provide an adequate template for those who seek to investigate changes in an increasingly globalised society which, according to many commentators, may now be regarded as *post-Fordist* in nature.

### *Post-Fordism and the Vocational Curriculum*

Barnett (1997) has described post-Fordism as a context in which corporations have adopted policies of

...customer sensitiveness accompanied by computer controlled processes of production [which] have led to an abandonment of traditional practices of mass production, replacing them with a 'post-Fordism' in which a 'just in time' set of business practices is accompanied by a customer driven corporate culture (...) as a complimentary development, corporations have become flatter organisations, with employees being supposedly 'empowered'...  
(p. 37)

The creation of flexible and highly automated production processes, fluid labour markets, and the instant pan-global transfer of capital are currently

transforming patterns of culture and consumption. Sharp (1996) has argued that post-Fordist practices, although not universal, are present in some sectors of the British economy and that they have important implications for the vocational curriculum in Britain. Carr and Hartnett (1996) quote Harvey (1990) as follows,

Fordist modernism has given way to all the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion and the commodification of cultural forms. (p. 127)

That the societal characteristics stated above now exist in varying degrees is not generally disputed, though the extent to which descriptors such as post-Fordist or postmodern may now be applied definitively to the whole economic and cultural infrastructure has been the subject of debate (Finegold and Soskice 1988; Finegold et al 1990; Ball 1991; Brown and Lauder 1992; Avis 1993a; Avis 1996b). The implications of the new modes of production, modes of information (Holub 1992), and the consequent new industries, for the vocational curriculum have, however, not been articulated in a way which moves beyond the formulations of traditional and liberal-progressive visions of education to fully accommodate what is already a radically transformed cultural context (Raffo, O'Connor and Lovatt 1996). The fundamental differences between the "traditional" and the "progressive" philosophies of education have often been summarised as opposed points on a series of dimensions, some adapted extracts from a relatively recent example of this (Carr 1995) are shown in *Table 3* below:

**[see over]**

<b>Table 3: Dimensions of Traditional and Liberal Progressive Education</b>		
	<b>Traditional</b>	<b>Liberal Progressive</b>
Political Perspective	Conservative	Liberal/communitarian
View of society	Elitist	Egalitarian
Guiding educational slogan	'Academic excellence'	'Learning from Experience'
Canonical texts	Plato's <i>Republic</i>	Rousseau's <i>Emile</i>
Types of Schools	Grammar Schools	Community Schools
Classroom organisation	Rigid grouping on basis of ability	Flexible grouping
Curriculum content	Subject centred: rigid subject differentiation	Student centred: weak subject differentiation
Curriculum knowledge	Objective	Subjective
Teacher's role	An expert transmitting cultural heritage	Facilitator of personal learning
Teaching methods	Formal instruction	'Discovery' methods
Assessment procedures	Traditional examinations testing knowledge	Informal evaluations of qualitative developments in understanding
<b>Adapted from Carr (1995) (p. 55)</b>		

Carr (1995) has pointed to the fact that the "traditional" and "liberal-progressive" educational philosophies are not "ahistorical", and that, in terms of what they seek to achieve, there are areas of overlap. The vocational curriculum in England, as exemplified by the BTEC courses and the GNVQs which have effectively superseded them, embodies most of the characteristics associated with the liberal progressive model outlined above. This has, in a sense, been part of the problem in terms of vocational programmes achieving "parity of esteem" with the "academic" General



Certificate in Education Advanced Levels (GCE "A Levels") which, epitomising traditional values, are widely respected. Despite the truth in Sharp's (1996) suggestion that GNVQs *"may"* [my italics] develop in such a way as to "...correspond' with a truly post-Fordist economy..." (p. 33), there is, as yet, no real evidence (beyond the notion of a core of "Key Skills") that they are taking on the features of post-Fordist production or postmodern culture. Indeed, in their outcomes based curriculum and instrumental structure GNVQs are still firmly rooted in a positivist modernism (Raffo, O'Connor and Lovatt 1996). Both the tradition and the popular perception of GCE A Levels fit with received notions of what might constitute the preparatory stage of an education which could conceivably lead to the production of some form of "intellectual", but the term is not one which can be used with conviction in relation to the aspirations of the vocational curricula at any time in the development of such education in England. In fact, to speak of "the intellect" at all in relation to the vocational curriculum seems mildly perverse, and this incongruity constitutes a major indictment of the development of vocational education and training in England.



## *What Kind of Pedagogy?*

For a mass of people to be led to think coherently (...) about the real, present world, is a 'philosophical' event far more important and 'original' than the discovery by some philosophical 'genius' of a truth which remains the property of small groups of intellectuals (...) it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity.

Gramsci quoted in Willis (1977) (p. 185)

Much of Gramsci's thinking on education was energised by his opposition to the 1923 Educational reforms then being implemented in Italy by the idealist philosopher and Minister of Education Giovanni Gentile on behalf of the Mussolini regime (see editors note in Gramsci 1971 p. 24). Gentile had attacked the traditional "instruction" of the old curriculum, arguing instead for "active education". Gramsci's editors have drawn attention to the importance of considering his biography in relation to his thinking on education. Gramsci's personal experience had given him a particular concern with the creation of "organic intellectuals" *within* the working class, that is, those who would provide revolutionary leadership and win hegemony for a new socialist culture in Italy. In the light of these very specific personal, historical and political factors it would be foolish to apply Gramsci's thinking on education and pedagogy as a direct prescription for contemporary vocational curricula. Rather it seems sensible to consider Gramsci's expressed ideas about education and pedagogy as a framework, or resource, through which it might be possible to discuss some aspects of the vocational curriculum in Britain as it has developed since the late 1970s.

Below is a series of extracts from Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* which have been selected on the basis of their relevance to recent and contemporary educational developments in Britain. They describe a trend towards the creation of a specifically vocational provision the take up of which would be, in practice, very largely limited to students drawn from the working and lower middle classes,

The tendency today is to abolish every type of schooling that is "disinterested" (not serving immediate interests) or "formative" - keeping at most only a small-scale version to serve a tiny elite of ladies and gentlemen who do not have to worry about assuring themselves of a future career (...) there is a steady growth of specialised vocational schools, in which the pupil's destiny and future activity are determined in advance. (p. 27)

Schools of the vocational type (...) are beginning to predominate over the formative school, which is not immediately "interested". The most paradoxical aspect of it all is that this new type of school appears to be advocated as being democratic, while in fact it is destined not merely to perpetuate social differences but to crystalise them...(p. 40)

The multiplication of types of vocational school (...) tends to perpetuate traditional social differences; but since, within these differences, it tends to encourage internal diversification, it gives the impression of being democratic in tendency. The labourer can become a skilled worker, for instance, the peasant a surveyor or petty agronomist. But democracy, by definition, cannot mean merely that an unskilled worker can become skilled. It must mean that every "citizen" can "govern" and that society places him, even if only abstractly, in a general condition to achieve this. (p. 40)

In criticising the spread of a very particular instance of vocationalism Gramsci was expressing similar fears to those which would exercise a number of liberal and radical educationalists in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s (see, for example, Education Group 1981; Finn 1987; Hyland 1994a and 1994b; and Pring 1995) as attempts were made to promote vocational education and training at the secondary, further and higher levels. Besides criticising the wide scale use of vocational education, specifically within the lower



(primary/secondary) levels of the educational framework, Gramsci was critical of the very particular "active learning" approach which was associated with it. The following extracts are suggestive of an opposition to what might now be called "progressive" teaching,

It is not entirely true that "instruction" is something quite different from "education". An excessive emphasis on this distinction has been a serious error of idealist educationalists and its effects can already be seen in the school system as they have reorganised it. For instruction to be wholly distinct from education the pupil would have to be pure passivity, a "mechanical receiver" of abstract notions..." (p. 35)

It is noticeable that the new pedagogy has concentrated its fire on "dogmatism" in the field of instruction and the learning of concrete facts - i.e. precisely in the field in which a certain dogmatism is practically indispensable... (p. 41)

...it will always be an effort to learn physical self-discipline and self-control; the pupil has, in effect, to undergo a psycho-physical training. Many people have to be persuaded that studying is a job, and a very tiring one, with its own particular apprenticeship - involving muscles and nerves as well as intellect. It is a process of adaptation, a habit acquired with effort, tedium and even suffering. Wider participation in secondary education brings with it a tendency to ease off the discipline of studies, and to ask for "relaxations". Many even think that the difficulties of learning are artificial, since they are accustomed to think only of manual work as sweat and toil. (p. 42)

Notwithstanding the above, Gramsci was able to state that

...the relationship between teacher and pupil is active and reciprocal so that every teacher is always a pupil and every pupil is a teacher.  
(p. 350)

The general tenor of the above passages may seem plain enough, though this transparency was disputed in the debate which followed Entwistle's (1979) contribution (Giroux, Holly and Hoare 1980). To elicit their "true meaning" is, in this context, neither possible nor necessary. The values which they *apparently* represent might, it can be imagined, be endorsed (in the British context) by "Old Thatcherites" and "New Labour" alike. Terms such as

"instruction", "concrete facts", and "self-discipline" have recently re-entered educational rhetoric in Britain as touchstones of good practice. It would be a mistake, however, to think that Gramsci was merely advocating a "hard graft is good for the soul" philosophy of education, for his thinking was grounded in the materialist conception of consciousness as a product of activity. Gramsci, as a Marxist, adhered firmly to the concept of praxis. This might be susceptible to a crude reduction which results in the idea that "manual and intellectual" or "vocational and academic" work should be fused in the educational context.

Avis (1993b) pointed to the (then) "emerging" political settlement in Britain, based within a "technicist logic" (p. 248), around vocational education and training. This now overwhelmingly evident state of non-contestation may well prolong the struggle for parity of esteem for the vocational curriculum. Avis (1993a), following an outline of the commonalities to be found in analyses across the (mainstream) political spectrum, warned against the dangers of seduction by the promised "high skills/high pay/high trust society" and the seemingly egalitarian potentialities of post-Fordism. In a later contribution Avis (1995) developed this argument further, pointedly identifying the creation of a framework within which

...teachers become transmogrified into facilitators of the learning process, professional and disciplinary knowledge becomes marginalised. The emphasis in these new teaching relations is on the student 'learning how to learn'. (p. 63)

More damningly, he claimed that,

Rooted within a post-Fordism there is assumed to be a homology of interests between people, capitalism and the needs of society. Implicitly the notion carries with it a tendency to technicise skills and to



separate these from their social and cultural location (...) Perhaps the most significant of all these issues is that the notion of a learning society rests upon an acceptance of capitalist hegemony (...) We have here the construction of a regime of truth. (p. 68)

### **Althusser and Vocational Education**

Bates (1995), In a discussion of the development of research on the competence movement and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) in Britain, highlighted the need for

...the growing research base on competence (...) to address issues of causality, impact and general social significance as well as policy issues. (p. 5)

Studies which chart and analyse the content, style, development and take up of vocational provision are vital to the formulation of a social analysis, and ultimately of a *theory* of these forms of curriculum. Ecclestone (1998) has pointed to the way in which NCVQ (now incorporated into QCA) has sponsored a large research programme in such a way so as to inhibit radical/critical thinking about the vocational curriculum. There is, especially at a time when, some claim, postmodernism has sounded the death knell of metanarratives, a sense in which it seems appropriate to place the template of "off-the-shelf old theory" on the terrain of "new times" in the search for evidence of some form of congruity. The great theorist of societal structures and of the ways in which these might determine the actions of individuals, the destiny of social classes, and the progress of societies was, for a time, Louis Althusser.

Althusser was born in Algeria in 1918. When he died in Paris in 1990 he had established a reputation as one of the foremost in an internationally renowned tradition of post-war French intellectuals. There was also a sense, however, that Althusser's influence had been something of an episode, a moment which had passed quickly and which has been retrospectively identified as a point of transition between structural Marxism and the ascendance in social theory of non-Marxist modes of thought (Elliott 1994a). The reasons for the power of Althusser's reputation and the relatively short currency of his ideas, like his writings, are complex. In a series of publications (Althusser and Balibar 1968; Althusser 1969, 1971b, 1972 and 1976) Althusser effectively reinvigorated "orthodox" Marxism. In fact his intellectual project has been read as "a reaction" against the existentialist and humanist presentations of Marx, (the latter perhaps being best represented by Gramsci), which had found a sizeable audience in academic circles in the West during the 1960s (Smith 1984). Althusser's structuralism was based on a conceptualisation of society as an entity composed of four "practices"; the economic; the political; the ideological; and the theoretical (or scientific) (Burrell and Morgan 1979). The determinism of Althusser's model, even if it was somewhat less crude than some of his many detractors have implied, as well as the charge of "functionalism", have cast his work into a form of disrepute. The purpose of resurrecting Althusser here is to examine to what extent his ideas might offer some potential for insight in relation to the questions which arise from a consideration of the nature, content and implementation of an educational curriculum, more specifically, the vocational curriculum of the type represented in England, Wales and Northern Ireland by BTEC programmes.

It is important to acknowledge that Althusser was a philosopher and not either a historian or, especially within his own conception, any kind of social scientist (Sheridan 1990). Moreover, he was particularly concerned with the analysis, and creation of, Marxist theory. For Althusser Marxism was "...a science or it was nothing..." (Harris 1992 p. 19). Althusser and Balibar (1970) had attacked Gramsci's historicism. Of all of Althusser's contributions it is arguably his essay *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)*, (Althusser 1971a), which has had the strongest resonance in debates surrounding education. Here Althusser outlines Marx's conception of societies as consisting of the *infrastructure* (this is the "economic base" of the forces of production) and the *superstructure*. In Althusser's schema the superstructure contains two levels or "floors"; the political-legal (law and the State), and the ideological (which is represented in various guises) (Althusser 1971a p.129). This metaphor, Althusser argues, demonstrates that there is a dependent relationship between the base and the superstructure, one in which the floors of the superstructure are "...determined by the effectivity of the base...". This formulation both allows for an element of "relative autonomy" for the superstructure and also for "reciprocal action" of the superstructure on the base (1971a p.130).

In articulating his theory of the State Althusser identifies the *Repressive State Apparatus* (RSAs), comprising Government, The Army, the Police and the Penal system, and the *Ideological State Apparatus* (ISAs) which differ from RSAs in that they are generally identifiable as distinct institutions, and in that,

unlike the RSAs, they *may* be private rather than public in nature. Amongst the ISAs which Althusser proposes are the Family ISA, the Religious ISA, the Communications ISA, and the Educational ISA. A further distinction which Althusser draws is that whilst RSAs function primarily by repression (ultimately violence), ISAs function "...massively and predominantly..." (1971a p.138) by ideology, and thereby manage to conceal and limit any repression which might be present within them. Althusser identifies the legal-political and ideological superstructure as being the means by which the relations of production within society are reproduced. More particularly, after acknowledging the religious ideological state apparatus as having been predominant in the pre and early capitalist stages of history, Althusser states that,

I believe that the ideological State apparatus which has been installed in the *dominant* position in mature capitalist social formations as a result of a violent political and ideological class struggle against the old dominant ideological state apparatus, is the *educational ideological apparatus*. (pp. 144 - 145)

Althusser credits the School with taking children at infant age and inculcating them with the ruling ideology, then,

Somewhere around the age of sixteen, a huge mass of children are ejected 'into production'...Another portion of scholastically adapted youth carries on...until it falls by the wayside and fills the posts of small and middle technicians, white collar workers, small and middle executives, petty bourgeois of all kinds. A last portion reaches the summit...the agents of exploitation (capitalists, managers), the agents of repression...and the professional ideologists...Each mass ejected en route is practically provided with the ideology which suits the role it has to fulfill in class society: the role of the exploited (with a 'highly developed' 'professional', 'ethical', 'civic', 'national' and a-political consciousness); the role of the agent of exploitation (ability to give the workers orders and to speak to them: 'human relations')... (p.147)



To what extent then did the BTEC National Business and Finance curriculum bear out Althusser's notion of an education for "technicians", "white-collar workers", and "petty bourgeois of all kinds"? Furthermore, was it a mode of education which *practically* provided the suitable ideology for these roles? These questions will surface in subsequent chapters.

### **Foucault and Vocational Education**

The name of Michel Foucault, a one time student of Louis Althusser's at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, has become one of the most highly revered in the history of Twentieth Century thought, just as Foucault's ideas have become recognised as amongst the most difficult to classify or categorise. Debates on Foucault (see, for example, Grey 1994, Hoskin 1994 and Neimark 1994) tend to focus on his relationship to Marx; one which is complex and ambiguous, though no less so, perhaps, than his relationship to the postmodernism within which some commentators have situated his thought. In order to clearly delineate Foucault from Marx Grey (1994) turns to Smart's (1986) comparison of Gramsci and Foucault in which it was contended that

...Foucault's work pries open the problem of hegemony in so far as it decentres the question of the state, introduces a non-reductionist conception of power, and displaces the concept of ideology...with analyses of relations of 'truth' and power' through which 'men govern (themselves and others)'. (p. 162)

The question remains however; what does Foucault say which is relevant to the study of a curriculum? Firstly, it has been said that Foucault was concerned to study and analyse "regimes of practices" (Lechte 1994). Ball (1990c) writes that,

Foucault has identified certain knowledges - human sciences - and certain attendant practices as central to the normalization of social principles and institutions of modern society. Among these are psychological, medical, penitential, and educational knowledges and practices. (p. 2)

Foucault, at least within the site of education, might be primarily associated with the notions of discipline and of power. The concept of schools and of educational processes as being concerned with the construction of an obedient or governable subject can be explicated from the work of Foucault, and, in particular from *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (first published in 1975). In this study Foucault charts how the Eighteenth Century saw a transition from public execution to penal retention as a societal control technique. Within this historical phase a number of methods/technologies associated with the control of individuals were developed.

At the level of the human body, as opposed to the intellect/mind, a basic requirement for control was that of physical enclosure and subsequent distribution within space and over time. By the division of buildings educational spaces took on some characteristics of the factory. These designs facilitated supervision, hierarchy and reward. Donald (1992b) refers to the English monitorial schools of the early Nineteenth Century as illustrating the kind of architecture which Foucault described as permitting

...an internal, articulated and detailed control - to render visible those who are inside it; in more general terms, an architecture that would operate to transform individuals: to act on those it shelters, to provide an hold on their conduct, to carry the effects of power right to them, to make it possible to know them, to alter them. (p. 172)

Foucault refers to Jeremy Bentham's penitentiary design, the "Panopticon", as an ideal form for control. This consisted of a central watch-tower from which a single observer could watch over a circle of tiered individual cells. The design meant that the prisoner could be observed at all times but would be unaware whether or not observation was taking place at any specific time; in this way, control would become "internalised" within the psyche of the individual. Sarup (1982) argues that Panopticism, far from being a "dream building" is actually a kind of "diagram" of how power functions,

Panopticism appears to be merely the solution of a technical problem, but through it a new type of society emerges, a society not of spectacle but of surveillance. This is done through the disciplines, those tiny, everyday, physical mechanisms, those systems of micropower that are essentially non-egalitarian and asymmetrical. The disciplines characterise, classify, specialise; they distribute along a scale, around a norm, hierarchize individuals in relation to one another and, if necessary, disqualify and invalidate. (p. 20)

In addition to organising the location or place of an individual, another important factor was the time-table. Time was planned, organised and controlled in increasing detail and with it was a tendency to break down a subject and to align the progression within it with time. A process of control was introduced by which

...the workshop, the school, the army were subject to the whole micropenalty of time (latenesses, absences, interruptions of tasks), of activity (inattention, negligence, lack of zeal), of behaviour (impoliteness, disobedience), of speech (idle chatter, insolence), of the body ('incorrect' attitudes, irregular features, lack of cleanliness), of sexuality (impurity, indecency). (Foucault 1991 p. 178)

Thus deviance from the normal was, in a sense, pathologised and as a consequence of this the systems through which people passed could be seen as systems of normalisation. This required the exercise of observation and of judgement, the creation of norms and averages, of passes and fails. The



means by which this could be most efficiently done was by subjection to "tests", that is by various forms of examination. By this means the individual is reduced to a grade, is allocated a calculable value and becomes thereby the object of what is, in effect, a process of accountancy. Indeed, it is Hoskin (1990), a researcher in the field of Accounting and Finance history, who has dubbed Foucault the "crypto-educationalist" in that his concern with the examination made him the "unwitting" "grandmaster of pedagogic power" (p. 40).

Given that Foucault is generally seen and posited as oppositional to Marxism (if not, fundamentally, to Marx) it is interesting to consider a discussion by Sarup (1993) of the relationship between the ideas of Foucault and those of his erstwhile teacher Althusser. Sarup sees a similarity between the exertion of control via Panoptic surveillance (ultimately self controlled) and that emerging from Althusser's account of ideology. Both Foucault and Althusser were "anti-humanist" in their respective philosophical stances, both were concerned in the application of anti-humanist approaches to the reading of texts, and both saw science and knowledge as problematic. A major difference, however, is that Foucault rejects the concept of ideology as an epistemological entity. For Foucault "discourses" (structured systems of 'speech' and of 'signs') carry their own power and do not need to be linked to the mode of production (Sarup 1993 p. 78). [Hoskin (1994) refers to discourse as a term which "...concerns what at a given era is said, written, thought out of all the things that could be said, written and thought: i.e. the historically specific *field* of what is said." (p. 67)].

The specific utility of Foucault's analysis of power in relation to this study is in relation to a consideration of pedagogical practices associated with "student centredness", which has been the officially prescribed approach to the BTEC curriculum. Gore (1995) quotes Foucault's statement that,

In thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking rather of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their action and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives. (p. 167)

Gore investigates eight major "techniques of power" in four different educational sites. These techniques are surveillance, normalisation, exclusion, classification, distribution, individualisation, totalisation, and regulation. Each of these practices is commonplace within the educational experience, and they often co-exist or overlap; together they constitute what Gore refers to as "the pedagogical regime" (p.169). In the discussion which follows in Chapter 8 there will be an attempt to describe how each of these eight techniques might be typically deployed within the context of the BTEC curriculum model.

## Lyotard and Vocational Education

...universities and the institutions of higher learning are called upon to create skills, and no longer ideals...the transmission of knowledge is no longer designed to train an elite capable of guiding a nation towards its emancipation, but to supply the system with players capable of acceptably fulfilling their roles at the pragmatic posts required by the institutions.

Lyotard (1984) p. 48

Lyotard has been credited with bringing the term "postmodernism" into general circulation (Storey 1993), certainly his work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (first published in English in 1984) has been massively influential. Lyotard defines the postmodern as "...incredulity towards metanarratives." (ibid. p. xxiv). In making the presupposition that the age in which we live is subject to this sense of dissolution Lyotard points to a crisis of the status of knowledge and to the end of "universalist" or totalizing systems of thought such as liberalism and Marxism.

Lyotard employs the concept of "language games", in which different types of "utterances" are employed within all narrative discourses - including science (and social science). He argues that "Society as a totality is displaced by 'flexible networks of language games' " (Usher and Edwards 1994 p. 157). The relationship between scientific and narrative knowledge is a particular concern of Lyotard's, Sarup's (1993) account of his position explains that

...narrative knowledge certifies itself without having recourse to argumentation and proof. Scientists, however, question the validity of narrative statements and conclude that they are never subject to argumentation or proof. Narratives are classified by the scientist as belonging to a different mentality: savage, primitive, underdeveloped...Here there is an interesting twist in Lyotard's argument. He says that scientific knowledge cannot know and make known that it is true knowledge without resorting to the other,



narrative kind of knowledge...In short, there is a recurrence of the narrative in the scientific. (pp. 136-7)

Notwithstanding this presence of the narrative within science, science has been the privileged discourse of the modern era and, as a consequence of this primacy, has dominated education and the associated processes of pedagogy and research methodologies.

Lyotard argues that science has, within the context of the Modernist project, legitimised itself by recourse to grand or metanarratives which enfold scientific knowledge in "epic stories". Lyotard focuses on two of these; the quest for the emancipation of humanity, and the "speculative unity of all knowledge" (Usher and Edwards 1994 p. 160). The claim that science is the key to progress enables the State to control education in the name of freedom and progress. At the same time that science stakes a claim in the arena of liberation, it also posits a contribution towards the unity of knowledge, that is the notion that it works against the fragmentation of ideas and towards the one big truth which will "explain". Lyotard argues that the twin imperatives of progress and the seeking after truth constitute the two metanarratives upon which the modern university has rested. The current displacement of the role and social authority of the universities may be taken as evidence of the end of the modernist vision.

For Lyotard the primacy of concepts such as truth and falsehood in relation to the question of knowledge has been replaced by issues of efficiency and inefficiency and the term which he uses to describe this new focus is "performativity". In this circumstance knowledge becomes a commodity which

can be translated into quantities of information (Usher and Edwards 1994 p. 166). It is a saleable product the function of which is to augment power. Knowledge which does not fit into the game of performativity is effectively disqualified. A key factor in this development has been the advent and extraordinary development of computer technology (Lyotard 1984 p.4). This phenomenon is something which has had, and continues to have, massive implications for both the ways in which knowledge is researched and the ways in which it is learnt. In particular, knowledge can be accessed and circulated in ways which circumvent the university. In response to this universities have entered the "information marketplace", selling products which will increase the efficiency of individuals who are seeking to market themselves within the economy (Cowen 1996). This places the skilled performance of economic activities - "competence" - as a key notion within the framing of educational processes and specifically in the design of curricula, not only in the university (which has traditionally and at least theoretically been free of purely economic imperatives) but even more acutely in the further education sector which was always instrumental to the needs of business. Lyotard (1984) referred to a trend towards "...a thorough exteriorization of knowledge with respect to the 'knower' at whatever point he or she may occupy in the knowledge process." (p. 4) It may well be that in England the particular point at which this estrangement is most intense is at the level of vocational education in the FE sector.

A curriculum which was based on competencies, and which placed an emphasis on skills, including learning skills, and which focused on "student

centred learning" through resource centres would be one which nicely illustrated Lyotard's description of performativity in the postmodern context. Education has effectively been shifted from its position as an aspect of social and moral welfare and has been situated as an arm of economic productivity in a predominantly market orientated enterprise culture. The BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance is a curriculum which would seem, at first glance, to illustrate this well.

Peters (1995) suggests that the importance of *The Postmodern Condition* derives considerably from the way it initiated a debate about the conditions of discourse which Lyotard was to subsequently elaborate in *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Lyotard 1988). The fundamental argument of this might be summarised as "There is no genre whose hegemony over others would be just." (Lyotard 1988 p. 158). Peters (1995) quotes Lyotard's definition of a differend as "...a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of judgement applicable to both arguments..." (p. 388). Peters (ibid.) explains that "Where Habermas and Critical Theory emphasise the bifurcation of reason into its instrumental (positivistic) and moral practical forms, Lyotard (following Wittgenstein) and Foucault emphasise the (postmodern) multiplicity and proliferation of forms of reason..." (p. 391). Lyotard is characterised as being against both the legitimation of education in the basis of either dialogic consensus (which is the logical goal of the modernist project) or, alternatively, upon the performance of a system.



## **Conclusion**

The above accounts of Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault and Lyotard have given an indication of how their respective ideas might be connected to an analytical history of a curriculum. Gramsci and Althusser are, through their shared commitment to Marxism and through direct theoretical connections, inextricably linked. The influence of Althusser's former student Foucault on Lyotard is no less obvious. The following two chapters will seek to provide a further framing of the study, firstly by providing a broad historical account of vocational education in England and, secondly, by exploring some of the sociological concepts (and the associated literature) which are fundamental to discussion of the curriculum. There will also be a consideration of relatively recent developments within the further education sector. At various junctures in the ensuing analysis the ideas outlined above will be utilised in order to interrogate aspects of the particular instance of vocationalism which is the primary subject of this study.

## Chapter Three

### THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION ENGLAND

To my knowledge, *no class can hold State power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the State Ideological Apparatuses*. I only need one example and proof of this: Lenin's anguished concern to revolutionize the educational State Ideological Apparatus...simply to make it possible for the Soviet proletariat...to secure the dictatorship of the proletariat and the transition to socialism.

Althusser (1971a) (p. 139) [italics in original]

Education is a key site through which a modern state exercises power. It provides a medium through which a government may seek to improve group and individual welfare, develop social cohesion, enhance economic performance, and foster a particular moral climate as well as, should circumstances demand it, impose control. New governments which have been brought to power through revolutionary upheavals (the Soviet Union, China, Cuba) have had, of necessity, to use education in ways which are highly visible and which are generally described/decried as "propaganda" or, more prosaically, as "brain washing". In more stable societies, where the primary mode of politics is both established and relatively unchanging, education as an instrument of control and social engineering becomes less visible and less audible. Indeed, returning to Althusser (1971a), he argues that the religious, family, legal, political, trade union, communications, and cultural Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) operate in concert "...dominated by a single score...". Extending his musical metaphor Althusser suggests that one ISA is more important than the rest, "...although hardly anyone lends an ear to its music: it is so silent! This is the school" (p. 146). In England, perhaps more

than in other industrialised democracies, the essentially social class basis of the education system is writ large in the independent/state schooling divide, but there is an extent to which the ideological function of the state system itself is less obvious, even where, especially where, it is vocational and therefore explicitly economically instrumental.

The history of the English education system has, in recent years, benefited from the publication of a number of significant studies which have provided both a chronological basis for understanding developments as well as an analysis of the associated social forces. In the important area of comparative studies the ground breaking Weberian work of Archer (1979) stands as a central contribution to our understanding of how educational systems develop and how they change. More recently Green (1990), in his study of the rise of the education systems in England, France and the USA, has acknowledged the power of Archer's work whilst in many ways advancing beyond it by a recognition of the significance of the social functions of the state and of the different relationships of social classes to the state. Comparative studies of aspects of vocational education are not common, though a number have appeared including Lewis (1994), who considers British and American attempts to bridge the vocational divide, and Hickox and Lyon (1998) who compare the British and Swedish experiences of vocationalism and schooling. Smithers (1993) incorporated an element of (highly unfavourable) comparison of English vocational education/training with the systems in France and Germany in his attack on the new vocationalism. Sedunary (1996) recounts a convergence of liberal progressivism and new vocationalism in Australia in



which she incorporates some consideration of developments in England. Focusing specifically on the Maltese experience of “trade schools” founded on radical socialist principles Sultana (1995) presents an interesting counterpoint to vocationalist projects in capitalist economies.

In terms of a broad account of the history of education in England and Wales Brian Simon's four volume *Studies in the History of Education* (1960, 1965, 1974 and 1991) is both authoritative and generally comprehensive, though Simon does not deal with vocationalism in the post-compulsory sector in any real depth. Donald (1992b) highlights the Elementary Education Act of 1870, which was introduced by W. E. Forster during Gladstone's first Liberal administration, as significant in that it empowered locally elected school boards to levy a rate for education. Although school attendance did not become compulsory until 1880 it was the 1870 Act which, in effect, introduced universal state-funded education in England. Donald argues that a grasp of the associated "...social and cultural dynamics..." (p. 18) requires an investigation which focuses upon educational ideologies, the routines of schooling as power mechanisms, and the ways in which knowledge is organised into a curriculum. It is intended that each of these three angles will, in due course, be considered in relation to the BTEC National Business and Finance curriculum over the past two decades. At this stage, however, an attempt will be made to outline wider contextual issues which will effectively serve as a background to more contemporary developments and concerns.

## **The Historical Function of Schooling**

The recent debate surrounding this issue has, in large measure, redounded on the efforts of Marxist and neo-Marxist scholars. The reason for this perhaps rests upon the centrality of historical materialism within Marxist philosophy, thereby making the development of accounts of how the phenomenon of state schooling was initiated and how it grew into an issue of some importance to those who would wish to create a critique of capitalism. Certainly an account of the growth and nature of educational provision which identified broadly economic determinants serving specific social class interests would suggest the correctness of a classical Marxist analysis based on the notion that social mechanisms have the primary function of serving capital. The inherent danger of utilising Marxist scholarship, especially in a climate of what is often defined as post-Marxist and, indeed, postmodern debate is that such work may be devalued by connotations of polemicism and that political antagonisms and prejudice may obscure issues concerning relationships between schooling and the economy, (which are in any case intrinsically complex). That this is possible is hinted at by Musgrove's (1979) caustic observation that "Inter-war Marxist historians attacked capitalists for with-holding education from the workers; today's neo-Marxists attack them for providing it." (pp. 72-73). McLennan (1976) has drawn attention to problems relating to such concepts as economism, humanism, empiricism and historicism in the creation of theoretical Marxist history and has acknowledged that the very idea of whether such a history is possible is open to question. The debate opens up philosophical issues which, if pursued, would obscure the particular concern in this context with the vocational

curriculum. The history-theory relationship with particular regard to education has been discussed in a relatively succinct fashion by Silver (1981) in his hostile review of *Unpopular Education* (Education Group 1981), an essentially Marxist critique of education policy making since 1944 which emanated from Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, and in the response which he provoked from its authors (Baron *et al* 1982). For Silver (1981) the content of *Unpopular Education* was essentially "...restless Marxist theory..." (p. 299) which failed to properly engage with tangible sociological, historical or even political issues. The debate between Silver and the Birmingham authors also provides an interesting example of the ideological tensions which were referred to above as potential intrusions in this field of enquiry. The argument suggests an uncomfortable and disconcerting relationship between theoretically grounded scholarship on the one hand, and an empiricist purity which derives from an unmediated connection to its sources on the other.

Silver is one of a number of scholars who have made important contributions to the history of educational ideas and provision in Britain. Johnson (1976) categorised Silver's work (in terms of its significance) with that which Brian Simon and E P Thompson had produced during the 1960s. It was Johnson's own work, however, which seemed to form the basis for the neo-Marxist discussions of this subject in a specifically British context. Amongst those acknowledging Johnson's contribution and influence were Corrigan (1979), Sharp (1980), Sarup (1982), and Green (1990), and he remains an important influence in related work to the present day: in the light of this it is



important that criticisms of Johnson's work brought by Hickox (1982) should be examined. The main features of the Marxist model which was, at that time, influential within the sociology of education were outlined and criticised by Hickox; many of the criticisms made will be discussed here and subsequently in relation to other matters. Hickox asked whether there was

...any strong evidence to suppose that capitalists have tended to view mass education as a major instrument of social control? (p. 572)

A second question enquired

...is there evidence that mass education has in fact been at all effective in fulfilling this function? (ibid.)

Hickox argued that the statements of educators and philanthropists employing the rhetoric of social control should not be taken at "...face value". He suggested that Johnson (1970) had fallen into that trap and his work was said to

...constitute an analysis of the ideology of philanthropists rather than the actual beliefs of capitalists. (Hickox 1982 p. 572)

Hickox contended that "educators" and "philanthropists" in their chase for funds, had a "...vested interest in emphasising education's potential as a source of social control." (ibid.). In effect this argues that a form of marketing exercise was operated in order to expand education; the technique, apparently, was to sell to hard-headed capitalists a product which was not wanted by appealing to a sentiment which did not exist. The aim is plausible, but the method seems naive. It may also be observed that an ideological definition of "capitalist" seems more useful in this context than economic

criteria. The typical philanthropist was, and is, often an advocate of capitalist society and politics.

Hickox cited the length of time between the crisis of industrial relations which occurred in the 1840s and the provision of a system of free mass compulsory education in 1891. Reference was also made to the small financial allocations which the state provided for education in the Nineteenth Century. These two factors, Hickox suggested, weigh against the possibility that education was used as "...a major instrument of social control" (ibid.). The term "major instrument" is vital. The idea that state schooling might be rapidly introduced on a mass scale and become a major governmental instrument over a relatively short time suggests a less than realistic view of the technical and administrative capabilities of Nineteenth Century British society. As an organisational and institutional infrastructure is created within a nation's historical development a juncture is reached where it takes on the capacity to be utilised instrumentally by whichever social grouping controls the apparatus of Government (Althusser 1971a). At the point of initiation, and in its early development stage, state education might be more usefully regarded as having the capacity to be used as a broad strategy. The degree of bureaucratic control would, however, be weak. There was, at that time, a lack of the managerial and technical machinery necessary in order for the State to use education in a relatively precise instrumental way.

The publication of *Schooling in Capitalist America* co-authored by the American economists Bowles and Gintis (1976) marked the appearance of a

key work in the sociology of education. In constructing their theory of a 'correspondence' between the American educational system and American economic life Bowles and Gintis make a detailed examination of the process of Nineteenth Century educational reform and expansion in the United States. Whilst acknowledging that it would not be possible, or desirable, to attempt to show the existence of a simple mechanistic relationship between economic structure and educational development, Bowles and Gintis did demonstrate causal links between the dynamics of educational change and the growth of capitalistic modes of production. More particularly, it was contended that even where demands for educational provision apparently emanated from protest and reform movements, the leadership was "...without exception..." (p. 175) provided by leading professionals and capitalists.

Ladwig (1996) refers to criticisms of the Bowles and Gintis thesis made by Apple (1990) on the basis of the inability of their model to "...account for the daily practices of schooling." (Ladwig 1996 p. 25), and also Whitty's (1985) point that whilst Bowles and Gintis dealt with the hidden curriculum they neglected the overt curriculum. It was in the wake of these inadequacies that the work of Apple and of Giroux, two prolific scholars, came to represent American neo-Marxism in the sociology of education. Giroux (1981) attacked Althusser's determinist ISA model and, as Ladwig (1996) has suggested, both Giroux and Apple were keen to inject an element of "possibilitarianism" into the equation. The "iron laws" of high structuralist Marxism, resting on the historical/economic Bowles and Gintis thesis in the American context and the political philosophy of Althusser internationally, were being challenged. Apple



found further room for manoeuvre from the rigidities of classical Marxism through the adoption of a "Parallist Position" whereby gender and race were seen as factors which might, in certain contexts, assume primacy over the orthodox lynchpin of social class (Apple 1988 provides an exposition of this stance).

Paul Corrigan's (1979) English based study *Schooling the Smash Street Kids*, as a preliminary to its discussion of contemporary working class youth and their attitudes to schooling, outlined the Nineteenth Century British State's activities in the field of education. Corrigan argued that the periodic government inspections of schools run by private societies prior to the Education Acts of 1870 were motivated by a fear of the growth of a specifically working class evolution of educational provision. For Corrigan the creation of state schooling was, in essence, a strategy aimed at the imposition of bourgeois morality; the creation of disciplined labour; and the reinforcement of national class hierarchies by the inculcation of 'civilised' values and the structuring of very different types of education for the upper and lower classes. These themes were subsequently explored by Green (1990) and Donald (1992a; 1992b).

In the influential *Education Limited* collection (Education Group 2 1991), the Birmingham based Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies group's follow-up to their *Unpopular Education* study discussed above, Green (1991) quotes a Parliamentary Select Committee of 1818 stating that "...England is the worst educated country in Europe..." before citing Balfour's 1902 claim that

"...England is behind all continental rivals in education." (p. 7). How well this resonates with the pronouncement of the National Commission in Education (NCE 1993) that "In the United Kingdom much higher achievement in education and training is needed to match world standards" (p. 43). For Green (1991) the historical reasons for Britain's relative under-development in terms of a national education system lie in religious divisions and, more importantly, structural obstacles in the form of economic complacency and aristocratic opposition to educational advance.

Donald (1992b), in a review of Nineteenth Century ruling class approaches to the issue of whether or not education should be provided for the working classes, presents an array of notorious sentiments including the following from Davies Giddy, President of the Royal Society in 1807, who felt that education for the working classes would be

...prejudicial to their morals and happiness, it would teach them to despise their lot in life, instead of making them good servants... instead of teaching them subordination, it would render them factious and refractory...it would enable them to read seditious pamphlets, vicious books, and publications against Christianity; it would render them insolent to their superiors;...if the bill [to establish parish schools] were to pass into Law, it would go to burden the country with a most enormous and incalculable expense, and to load the industrious orders with still heavier imposts. (p. 20)

By 1877 however, Leonard Horner, a Factory Inspector (also quoted by Donald *ibid.*) was able to discern that,

To put the necessity of properly educating the children of the working classes on its lowest footing, it is loudly called for as a matter of police, to prevent a multitude of immoral and vicious beings, the offspring of ignorance, from growing up around us, to be a pest and a nuisance to society; it is necessary in order to render the great body of the working class governable by reason. (pp. 22-23)



There is much similar evidence, extensively quoted in other studies, to suggest that the introduction of schooling was at least in part a strategy for social control (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Corrigan 1979; Sarup 1982; Green 1990; Foucault 1991). However, if schooling was more capable of being utilised strategically than instrumentally during the Nineteenth Century, the sophistication of modern state bureaucracy and its associated managerial technology enforces no such limitation today. A modern state clearly has the capacity to monitor and enforce attendance at schools across the whole of the population, as well as to establish and maintain national curricula, examining systems, and a regulated teaching personnel. Moreover, education, and especially perhaps vocational education and training, is widely recognised as a crucial factor in the international competitiveness of the British national economy (NCE 1993; CBI 1989 and 1993; DfEE 1997b).

### **Vocational Education and Training**

Silver and Brennan (1988) have summarised the various cultural "...stigmas and dichotomies..." (p. 18) which cross-penetrate the English education system. Since the early 1990s, however, there has been a political consensus regarding the need to raise the esteem and improve the quality of vocational education. The view of the former Conservative Government was set out in the White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES/DE/WO 1991), while both major opposition parties at the time outlined their concern for this hitherto relatively neglected area of educational policy and investment (Labour Party 1990 and 1991; Liberal Democrats 1990). This political will for



change was also evidenced by the substantial number of both governmental and quasi-governmental publications which appeared (CBI 1989 and 1993; CBI and NCVQ 1990; DES 1989 and 1991; DE 1989; DTI 1994; and NCE 1993 for example). Awarding bodies, primarily City & Guilds (CGLI), the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) and BTEC responded by issuing consultative documents and new curriculum statements which accorded with the model outlined by the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ 1990 and 1991; NCVQ and Training Agency 1990).

The historical background to English cultural attitudes towards the vocational was outlined by Weiner (1981). The strongest antipathies are perhaps to be found within the great English universities which have for centuries held sway over the intellectual climate. Manicas (1993) has discussed the way in which higher education in America, lacking the legacies of medievalism which lingered in the ancient European universities, embraced specifically technocratic knowledge. The instrumental and applied nature of vocational education, however, is sharply at odds with the liberal traditions and ethics of the English university as envisaged by John Stuart Mill, Newman or, more recently, Oakeshott (Williams 1989). Far from providing students with the "gift of an interval" in an exalted "place apart", where ideas may be pursued regardless of any extrinsic utility, a vocational curriculum invites them to apply themselves to the acquirement of skills which will oil the wheels of commerce. The consequence for many of these students is that they acquire employability and high earning potential at the cost of applying themselves to an area of study which lacks academic credibility.

The primary ethos of education in the school sector in Britain, and particularly of the examination system culminating in GCE A Levels, may be characterised as being ideological rather than vocational (Young 1998). That this character is now in transition, however, is demonstrated by the increasing introduction of vocationally orientated courses into secondary schools (Office for Standards in Education 1994). Distinctions between schooling in secondary schools and Non-Advanced Further Education (NAFE) are, at least outside the purely technological areas, becoming more administrative than pedagogical. In the unemployment crisis of the 1980's the then *ad hoc* provision of the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) programmes began to take on a permanent form, and the position of youth in relation to schooling became a vital concern (Ainley and Corney 1990; Ainley 1993). Cohen (1982) indicated the gravity of this development in the creation of an extended schooling which was so transparently a diversion as to barely warrant the adjective "training". The Youth Training Scheme (YTS), as its name should imply, firmly placed the emphasis on training rather than education and was, in the main, employer rather than college orientated. There were indications that college based training constituted a ghetto for those "trainees" not acceptable to employers. Trainees were not actually employed within host organisations. The use of the term "schooling" then, seems only in its most debased sense, to be applicable to the YTS.

Hickox and Moore (1995) and Hickox (1995) have usefully highlighted contrasting traditions and tensions in Liberal-Humanist education as well as



differing components in the development of vocationalism. Hickox and Moore (1995) argue that differentiation between progressivism and traditionalism, together with the consequences of post-war educational expansion and credentialism destabilised Liberal-humanist education provoking a legitimisation crisis. Analysing the Thatcherite “New Right” critiques of education Hickox and Moore (1995) identify a strategic alliance of forces of which vocationalist modernisers are but one (if powerful) strand. Furthermore, they argue, the predominant competency form of vocationalism has its roots in the pre-Thatcher Manpower Services Commission (MSC) and that from this base it has been transmitted to the “...linear descendants...” (p. 48) of that organisation, for example The Training Agency, NCVQ and the Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs). Noting the ironic resonance of vocationalism’s anti-academicism, ‘relevance’, and focus on experiential learning with some forms of liberal-humanist progressivism, and its consequent populist appeal they see a potential for vocationalism to,

Conceivably replace the more contentious and less prestigious forms of liberal-humanist education at the lower levels, thus stabilising the system, while preserving intact an elite academic pathway. The introduction of GNVQs alongside ‘A’ levels and the relationship of the new, ex-polytechnic university to the traditional sector in higher education is already suggestive of such a bifurcation. (p. 55)

Useful early discussions of the nature and meaning of MSC interventions in schooling and training included those by Moos (1979), Education Group (1981), Sarup (1982), and Ainley and Corney (1990). Evans (1987), in a study of radical adult education, includes some discussion of the MSC. For a full and more recent account of the rise of the MSC and the establishment of



TECs see Brendan Evans's (1992) *The Politics of the Training Market*. The relation of the development of the YTS to the overall policy of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative administration was interpreted in the following way by Schofield *et al* (1983)

...whilst the Government pursues privatisation, undermines or dismantles the 'Welfare State' and contracts public ownership, it strengthens the coercive arm of the state and develops new instruments for restructuring the economy and impressing its will on the working class. (p. 9)

Of those college lecturers who objected to Youth Training Scheme almost all put every effort into implementation (due to their commitment to the immediate needs of the young people before them and, not least, the desire to preserve their contracts of employment). Schofield *et al* (ibid.) also spelt out the awesome potential of the YTS as a control mechanism over the workforce,

At the end of the scheme each young person will receive a certificate detailing his or her achievements in a range of very basic competence. More importantly, there will also be a record of motivation, attitudes, punctuality - a record for all time and for every employer, and the progress of trainees will be stored on computer. Thus we face the prospect of a computerised file on the future work force.

Moreover, any young person who fails to go on a training scheme is hardly going to be looked upon favourably by employers. "How did you get on during your training scheme?" will become a familiar question for the next generation of young workers. Is this the extension of freedom for the individual promised by the Tories? (p. 18)

This kind of initiative has become a staple of state sponsored vocational training programmes over the last two decades and it is contended here that the search for "...strong evidence to suppose that capitalists have tended to

view mass education as a major instrument of social control..." (Hickox 1982 p. 572) can now be abandoned.

Gleeson (1986) focused specifically upon the impact of the MSC in the Further Education sector. Originally welcomed by many as a means by which access to training could be extended, the MSC was charged with having exploited and manipulated the "...voluntaristic and entrepreneurial traditions ..." (p. 49) of FE. Gleeson identified the emergence of a three tier division, a development also highlighted by Green (1986 and 1988). The categories are broadly those of the traditional craft courses; the academic/technical courses; and the "tertiary modern intake" (which Green 1986 refers to as a "...disparate array of courses..." p. 105). For Gleeson the process was creating what was, in effect, a ghetto situation primarily 'designed' to occupy and marginalise unemployed working-class youth. The increasing appearance of "self-starting" courses, designed to encourage the establishment by trainees of their own businesses was cited as evidence of the tendency to think in terms of a future outside the mainstream of the comparative security of the employer/employee contract. The failure of generic skills training is, according to Gleeson's argument, already evident. In its stead he advocated a re-recognition of the values of a general education. Gleeson, together with Hodgkinson (Gleeson and Hodgkinson 1995), provides an extended account of the embeddedness of the "three tier" model of education not only in Plato's conception of men of gold, bronze and iron but in English classical humanism. The 1944 Education Act had, of course,

effectively enshrined this in the state education sector with its division of grammar schools, technical schools, and secondary moderns (Simon 1991).

Moore (1987) has analysed the focus of the range of curricula associated with the 'new vocationalism'. His study reveals a concentration on 'behavioural occupationalism' (which is defined as "...the derivation of 'educational' objectives from behaviourally defined occupational skills as constructed through occupational skills inventories..." (p. 227). For Moore it was this approach which was the thing which was truly 'new'. The consequences of such a philosophy are perceived as, firstly, a limiting of the possibility of the acquirement of elaborating and therefore potentially critical knowledge and, secondly, the presentation of production processes in a particular ideological form. Moore places emphasis on the educational practices which are employed in the delivery of the 'new vocationalism', a concentration which follows from his contention that it should be characterised as "...an ideology of production regulating education rather than an educational ideology serving the interests of production..." (ibid.). The 'hidden curriculum' of the 'new vocationalism' in the 1980s was, Moore argued, the expression of the possessive individualism of the market economies.

As stated above, Green (1986) shared Gleeson's "three-tier" view of FE. Like Gleeson, Green did not regard the extension of access to further education as an extension of educational opportunity. Curriculum changes stressing "competence" and "effectiveness" rather than "knowledge and understanding"



(p. 108) were regarded as evidence that liberal education has been subverted by an emphasis on "basic skills" or "social and life skills" (SLS). Far from gaining an intellectual framework which would facilitate at least a potential for upward mobility, the student would be equipped with skills appropriate for coping with either the world of mundane and intermittent work or, alternatively, with that of long term unemployment.

Where Gleeson explained the entrée of the MSC as one which was eased by the traditional market orientation of NAFE, Green (1986) argued that the tertiary modern sector curriculum had so quickly established itself as a consequence of its specifically progressive rhetoric. The accent on student centred activity learning and integrated "relevant" course content which were such prominent features of the BEC/BTEC National programmes (see Chapter 6) echo several important progressive themes. The difference is that whereas the original concepts were concerned concretely to explore the social world, now these ideas were to be used only in relation to the subject of work methodology and behaviour. Green characterised this reactionary utilisation of progressive ideas as "...the replacement of education with a diluted form of social therapy..." (ibid. p.115). As with Gleeson, Green was essentially opposed to vocational education as a major element of mainstream provision, and, evoking Gramsci's ideas on the need for discipline, rigour, excellence and a traditional didacticism (Entwistle 1979), he calls for an intellectually based education with the capability of developing a counter-hegemonic culture within the working class.

Finn (1987) traced the development of the MSC and its initiatives by way of a detailed critique which identified the Youth Training Scheme as "...the realisation of proposals first outlined in the Education Act 1918..." (p. 13). In a typically trenchant introduction to Finn's contribution Willis (1987) powerfully and simply evoked the duplicity of a policy which provided training without jobs in order to mask unemployment and, effectively, attempted to turn worklessness into a pathological condition associated with youth. Willis recognised, however, that

...from a practical working-class point of view, it may well seem that, short of the millenium, there will always be social classes and they will always be reproduced somehow. Meanwhile the problem is how to find the best personal and collective terms of accommodation and settlement now. (p. xvii).

If the above sentiment has been made prematurely obsolescent as a consequence of invoking the millenium, there is little doubt that vocational education and training was to be reorganised and repackaged as a major option in post-16 provision. This work was mainly undertaken under the agency of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) until its absorption in 1997, together with the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA), into the newly formed cross-sector Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA). Established as an independent body funded by government in October 1986, the remit of the NCVQ had been to implement the proposals of the White Paper *Education and Training - Working Together* (DE and DES 1985). For Jessup (1991), (Director of Research, Development and Information for NCVQ), vocational qualifications should develop rational relationships within the context of a comprehensive framework; he also

believed that they should be demystified by means of open access and an emphasis on the achievement of explicit outcomes (competencies). The NCVQ model had immense implications, but, as Jessup acknowledged (ibid. p. 114), it would not necessarily lead to corresponding changes in the structure of provision within HE. This was indeed, in the short-term at least, to be the case and this perpetuated serious discontinuities in the progress of vocational students seeking to move from FE to HE, thereby continuing to jeopardise what was already an important if sometimes precarious route of progression for many BTEC students.

Hodkinson (1990) has discussed the NVQ framework in relation to the broader context of 16-19 education. Hodkinson articulated concerns regarding the high degree of employer control over NVQs and their questionable suitability for full-time students. Many of the issues raised by Hodkinson were subsequently addressed by the development in 1991 of General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) which, at Advanced level, were to be known as 'Vocational A Levels' - a term which was subsequently abandoned. The problem of "parity of esteem" in English education is an old one. The term itself has been in use for the best part of half a century, Simon (1991) quotes the Conservative Education Minister Sir David Eccles referring in 1955 to "parity of esteem" between grammar, technical and secondary modern schools as having been an aspiration following the 1944 Education Act. Eccles had hoped to preserve the 11-plus examination and the grammar schools by making technical and secondary modern schools an alternative route to well paid jobs through vocational



qualifications. The problem of parity of esteem has still not been effectively addressed, perhaps because it is so deeply seated in institutional divisions and cultural attitudes towards the vocational. Until very recently there has been every indication of a firm resolve on the part of the Government to resist all pressures to create a unified system of qualifications across the academic/vocational divide. This arises primarily from a strong attachment to the traditions associated with the GCE Advanced Level system of examination and qualifications. The National Commission on Education Report (NCE 1993) recommended the establishment of a General Educational Diploma (GED), available at two levels, to replace GCSEs, GCE A Levels and BTEC. Young (1993) continued to suggest the adoption of a unified national system of qualifications which he, amongst others, had proposed in the landmark paper *A British Baccalaureat* (Finegold, Keep, Miliband, Raffe, Spours, and Young 1990). This is something which Young, perhaps re-energised by the potential for change offered by the election of New Labour, with considerable intellectual force and not a little passion, has advocated more recently (Young 1998). These proposals rest on the logic that the continued existence of two separate and quite different routes for the academic and the vocational effectively testifies to (and exacerbates) notions of inequality.

Robinson (1997), in a Centre for Economic Performance study based on the relationship between earnings and performance and following a statistical survey based on 40,000 observations, emphatically concluded that,

There is no parity of esteem between academic and vocational qualifications in the labour market, which is almost certainly why we do

not observe parity of esteem in the education system. At every level of the national framework individuals working full-time with academic qualifications earn significantly more than individuals with notionally equivalent vocational qualifications (p. 14)

## **Post-Fordism and Vocational Education and Training**

Carter (1997) has, with some justification, expressed his dissatisfaction with the way in which educational debates have tended to operationalise the term post-Fordism as a generalised metaphor. He calls for educational theorisation which makes its particular use of post-Fordism explicit and which interrogates the structures mediating the political and educational realms. Young (1993), in a paper which developed ideas contained in Young and Spours (1992), defined the concept of 'post-Fordism' as

...a rather loose, albeit evocative, term which refers to the appearance of a collection of industrial innovations, such as flexible, specialised production, new areas of information-based technologies, flatter management structures, and the new emphasis upon teamwork... (p. 212).

Young acknowledged that the idea of post-Fordism is highly contestable in regard to the relative extent of the associated developments within various national economies. Notwithstanding this, he identified the trend away from systems of mass production towards ones based on *flexible specialisation* as a change which will make new intellectual demands on employees. The curriculum implications of this are interpreted as the need for an emphasis

...on new and innovative kinds of connectiveness between knowledge areas and different forms of specialised study interwoven with a generic core of knowledge, skills and processes.. (p. 213).

In advocating the term *connective specialisation* over that of flexible specialisation Young evokes a context where individuals would have the capacity to make links between their "...knowledge and skills in the curriculum

and wider democratic and social goals..." (p. 218). The supplanting of traditional forms of divisive specialisation by connective specialisation is seen as making possible (and necessary) the transition towards a curriculum which would encapsulate breadth and flexibility; provide connections between core and specialist studies as well between and academic and vocational studies; which would accommodate progression and credit transfer; and provide a clear sense of purpose.

Avis (1993a; 1993b) argued that radicals must exhibit caution with regard to the emancipatory possibilities arising from post-Fordism. In outlining the political and social consensus which has emerged around the notion that the low skills equilibrium (Finegold and Soskice 1988) of the English economy must be broken, Avis was particularly concerned to question its implications for practice which recognises structural antagonisms in society. In effect Avis sees the post-Fordist model as one which leads to the adoption of a consensual model of society. He counsels against the desertion of a radical agenda on the basis of a promise of a supposedly liberating development which essentially celebrates the individual as a means of more efficiently contributing to the accumulation of capital.

For Finn (1987) there was no reason why vocational education should necessarily be defined by employers. A critical perspective, one which challenged the processes and context of the experience of work, is seen as possible where there is a will to seriously examine prevailing assumptions. It appears then that harsh economic and political realities have severely dashed



the liberal ideal of a high level of general education for all. Furthermore, the comprehensive vision of schooling itself is in danger of subversion by the imminent creation of a kind of educational apartheid which leads the working class into vocational training for often illusory jobs, whilst those who know better direct their children down the traditional road to higher education in the established universities.

The history of education in England is one which mirrors the nation's social class divisions and which has grown out of a very particular wider context of economic and political circumstances which incorporate both rapid industrial expansion and severe economic crisis, both high imperialism and the demands of a multi-cultural society. The post-war period has seen, especially since the early 1960s, by and large, a technology focused "modernisation" agenda at the centre of most Government inspired visions of education. There has been, in Gramscian terms, a clear hegemony of capitalistic thinking precisely because capitalism itself has, since the late 1940s, continued to grow in confidence. The near total collapse of the communist world having fuelled an almost tangible sense of triumph throughout the West. Oppositional thinking amongst intellectuals and within various professional groups has, since the late 1960s, been in decline. Educational institutions, including universities, have exhibited the features which Lyotard has seen as symptomatic of performativity (Lyotard 1984). It is within the broad context sketched above that the BTEC curriculum must be placed.

## **The "Era of BTEC" and the Road to Competence**

The BEC/BTEC curriculum has now directly touched the lives of millions of people who have worked within its framework; some as teachers, the great majority as students. In 1996 Edexcel (1996) were able to announce that over 3 million students have enrolled on BTEC programmes since 1983. The evolution of the curriculum, in terms of structure and content, represents a complex fabric. There have been, as a result of the BEC/BTEC curriculum, real and practical consequences in terms of personal, organisational and corporate successes, and failures. There has also been a distinctive direction of curriculum development which has been both influential and influenced; one which has reflected its times and which must therefore be accounted for, in an historical sense, by an analysis which is able to relate the experience of BEC/BTEC to theoretically aspects of/currents within the "era". The notion of an era is one which is rich with connotations having associations of growth and of decline. There is, perhaps, an element of nostalgia and an hint of transient omniscience. In referring to the "era of BTEC" there is no intended implication that BTEC has been some form of hegemonical force within the educational arena, but rather a suggestion that BTEC was one representative part of the era which followed the 1960s and that it might now be expected to fizzle out very soon. The political and social descriptive terms most readily associated with the time in question are legion, some of the most popular and potent have been Thatcherism, communitarianism, postmodernity, and post-Fordism. In the sphere of education, it is argued, the key word has been *vocationalism*, and within this broad movement there has been a clear trajectory, exemplified by successive BTEC National programmes, towards a

model of a strongly defined strain of curriculum which is best characterised as Competence Based Education and Training (CBET). Crudely put, this is a mode of curriculum which focuses primarily on what individuals can do rather than on what they know. It is instrumental to the particular needs, usually employment based, which are used to define the competencies; in other words, it directly serves the economy.

The field of research relating to vocational education and specifically to CBET in Britain has grown considerably during the past decade. Bates (1995) has identified and outlined the various strands which are currently evident within this work. A major category of work is that which might be characterised as "evaluative". This is research which has been primarily sponsored by state agencies such as the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ) and the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) (see also Ecclestone 1998). Bates (1995) sees this work as focusing primarily on issues of implementation rather than on academic enquiry of the kind which questions fundamental issues. In this respect such studies may be regarded as instrumental to the management of CBET rather than as a real basis for examining its implications. A further category of evaluative studies has been that which has been primarily concerned to identify the responses of students to CBET, whilst a related body of research endeavour has investigated the views of teachers. Yet another type of opinion/effect seeking study has targeted the views of employers, much of this having been conducted on the question of the effectiveness of CBET in relation to the creation of a "world



class" work force. Bates (ibid.) suggests that a "significant absence" in the debate has been a

...consideration of the broader purposes of post-16 and adult education, for example social and political education, or education for citizenship, in the context of escalating economic and social change. (p. 9)

A similar point was made by Gleeson and Hodkinson (1995) who specifically identified the failure of the newly introduced GNVQs to come to terms with such issues.

The contributions of those adopting an educational, as distinct from evaluative, perspective have sometimes produced criticism which Bates (1995) has characterised as "...polemical and impassioned." (p. 10) The emphasis of CBET on the assessment of performance having been associated with the unfashionable, (that is amongst many educationalists), taint of behaviourism. As with the body of work which is primarily concerned with evaluation, those who have approached CBET from an "educational" perspective have done so from a variety of angles - but whilst the evaluators have tended towards an uncritical instrumentalist approach, the educationalists have generally been critical of curriculum developments such as NVQs and GNVQs. A more recent category in research relating to CBET has been the emergence of studies which adopt sociological and/or historical approaches. Here the concern is to place the competence movement within social and cultural trends . Bates suggests that sociological studies have argued that

...while the official discourse is characterised by a learner-  
emancipatory ethos, the movement also needs to be examined in

terms of changing forms of social control over relations between education and work. (p. 10)

Historical studies might seek to describe and interpret the origins and development of CBET through a consideration of policy and of the operationalisation of awards within the workplace and the economy as well as within the educational system. Bates points out that "...the influence of social context factors on the implementation of CBET remains relatively unexplored." (p. 11). Her own work is currently concerned with the actuality of CBET implementation and the way in which, at the point of delivery, actors may interpret policy differently to the manner which might have been anticipated.

The need to explore social context factors has been a major concern of this [my] study. In particular, there has been a recognition of the need to relate the research dimensions identified by Bates (1995) (evaluative, educational, sociological and historical) to each other through a socio-historical case study of a specific instance of a curriculum. In some respects the study could be (crudely) defined as a kind of "curriculum biography". The ingredients of this have included a review of genealogy; formative influences; changing physical characteristics over time; the experiences and views of those who have known the curriculum first-hand (designers; students, teachers), and second-hand (employers, higher education teachers); and the views of various writers who have taken the curriculum (and those of a similar kind) as their subject. This kind of biography, however, if limited to the purely descriptive, inevitably ends up as a kind of "story" which, however "true", reveals little of real substance. It is for that reason that linkages have been made to the "wider

times", that is to ideas which whilst *apparently* having little direct connection have in fact some potential in showing a subject within a realm which is not the obvious one. What those with first hand knowledge say has been given due importance, but there has also been an attempt to place the subject against the voices of some of those social commentators (in this case Gramsci, Althusser, Foucault and Lyotard) who have not spoken about it but who have attempted to understand the intellectual environment, the "habitat", which created and sustained it.

### **Competence and Control**

The notion of competence based curricula does not sit easily with liberal, progressive, critical, or even traditional conservative conceptions of education. It does, however, both through its prevalence and its mechanisms, constitute a system which can be easily represented as one of regulation (of society and the person) and as a form of "surveillance". Jones and Moore (1993) have persuasively argued that the competence movement effectively constitutes a societal move to shift power away from the relatively autonomous professional communities which held significant power in the 1960s and 1970s as a means of asserting state control. Characterising the competence based approach as "..empiricist, atomistic, and reductionist." (p. 388), Jones and Moore attack the assertion of "transparency" which advocates of competence claim as well as challenging the frequently made claims to "relevance" and "realism". Hodgkinson (1994), Bates (1998a and 1998b), and Bloomer (1998) have problematised the issue of empowerment specifically in relation to the GNVQ programmes which superceded the BTEC



National, demonstrating the parallel with Human Resource Management conceptions of empowerment and the industrial shift towards individualisation, self-responsibilisation and self-regulation. This theme will be returned to in Chapters 6 and 8.

For Avis (1995) there is a perceptible "settlement" around policy debates relating to post-compulsory education which is based on what he regards as a "...rhetorical and imaginary post-Fordism..." (p. 58). This developing consensus, Avis suggests, is predicated on both some postmodernist theorising and ideas rooted in human resource management, and is one which jettisons the notion of social class. According to Avis this thinking seemingly envisages a new epoch; in a world where capitalist production relations will have been transformed into a new and modernised form, a society based on learning will be born. Paradoxically, in the "learning society" the most dispensable of commodities will be knowledge itself,

These arguments are lodged within a model of technological change that is echoed in post-Fordism and indeed has an affinity with forms of post-modernism that challenge foundational knowledge. There is a move towards viewing knowledge as relativised and being situationally specific. Within such a context all one is left with is the ability to learn. It is this capacity that is accorded some sort of transcendental quality as a result of knowledge and skill losing their fixed nature. (ibid. p. 63)

Avis goes on to suggest that a perceived alliance between "radical progressive educators" and "curriculum/conservative modernisers" has resulted from the postmodernist view of a highly fragmented social formation where "...an apparent coincidence of interests...silences questions of social antagonism." (p. 64). The power of perspectives grounded in postmodernism should, however, not be underestimated. The field is a rich one and it can

therefore *appear* to present a cacophony of epistemologically promiscuous theories. It would be a mistake to regard postmodernism as an homogenous whole. Part of its allure rests on the undoubted power of some postmodern theories and ideas to explain aspects of social change which were completely unanticipated by classical Marxism and this can, on occasion, raise the ire of those with a commitment to Marxism. In order to pursue some particular aspects of the discussion presented by Avis it would be necessary to depart from a specifically education based debate to consider ideas which address more fundamental questions associated with the nature of contemporary society. This would be beyond the scope of this study.

Although BTEC National programmes have lingered on, especially in the form of part-time National Certificates, the launch of GNVQs in 1993 effectively signaled the beginning of the end for the BTEC National Diploma (see *Appendix D*). The structure of the GNVQ model will be outlined in Chapter 6. Gleeson and Hodkinson (1995) argued that in order to succeed GNVQ would need to establish a credible middle track. Like Finegold *et al* (1990) and Young (1993), Gleeson and Hodkinson (1995) felt that the three track system which the GNVQ/NVQ/A Level model enshrined should be abandoned in favour of a single track or "...unified curriculum structure..." (p. 9). They see Skilbeck's (1976) formulation of "reconstructivist" ideology as dominant in a GNVQ model which was launched amidst a rhetoric of upskilling and economic rationalism. Gleeson and Hodkinson (1995) were pessimistic about the prospects of GNVQs within the context of "quality speak" jargon and managerialism in FE and the absence of a genuine debate about the wider

purposes of education. Hodkinson (1994) had earlier suggested that the education of all young people should encompass personal effectiveness, critical autonomy, and community as overlapping dimensions. The new GNVQ had failed to do this.

Drawing mainly upon the American experience of vocationalism, though containing a brief consideration of Britain, and inspired mainly by Deweyan principles, Lewis (1997) suggests that school based vocational education should be *about work* with the aim of vocational literacy, whilst post-school vocational education should be *for jobs* though incorporating an element of “liberal coursework”. Lewis also suggests that this education for jobs should constitute a preparation for “...job families rather than in specific job facets.” (p. 487). This prescription for education for jobs with an addition of liberal studies, at least in the context of British post-compulsory education, appears strangely anachronistic, invoking the craft technician and junior clerical courses with their added on social studies component which BEC swept away in the late 1970s/early 1980s.

The early 1980s witnessed the demise of liberal/general studies as a feature of certain vocational/technical courses in further education. This naturally alarmed the (usually) politically and educationally progressive humanities and social science graduates who constituted the teaching staff of the Liberal Studies Departments which serviced the “mainstream” courses in FE. Had they been aware of the “progressive features” of this new vocationalism little solace would have been provided as their timetables collapsed with the



saving grace of Adult Access Studies still beyond the horizon. The shared features of the new vocationalism and progressive educational thinking have been noted by Jones (1989), Ball (1990), Education Group 2 (1991), Avis (1991), and Rattansi and Reeder (1992) and subsequently numerous others. Hodgkinson (1991) argued that liberal education and progressive vocationalism are “complementary” rather than competing paradigms which belong in “progressive partnership” (p. 85). Common features include an emphasis on skills rather than content; on student centred inquiry based learning rather than the passive absorption of knowledge passed down by the teacher; on group based learning and co-operation rather than competitive individualism; on an integrated curriculum rather than traditional subjects; and on “Real World” relevance rather than abstraction. There is also a (at least) rhetorical commitment within the new vocationalism to the notion of equality of opportunity. A further similarity is that radical educators, seeking to dissolve established hierarchies of labour, stressed the unity of mental and manual labour, something which new vocationalists also espoused in the light of new technologically dominated modes of production. It is interesting to note that whilst Marx shared with Adam Smith the conception of the mental component of labour as the prior planning of work activity (Winch 1998), Gramsci’s (1971) formulation was a more sophisticated notion of “muscular nervous effort” and “intellectual-cerebral elaboration” as being simultaneous within the labour process (p. 9).

Whilst Avis (1991) argues that English new vocationalism has reduced progressivism to no more than “useful technique”, Sedunary (1996), in a

discussion of the Australian new vocationalism which shares many features of the English variant, argues that the connections between progressive and vocational education run deep. Sedunary contends that the historical location of both movements at the conjuncture of modernity and postmodernity has created organic common features which are a response to "...an era impelled by the primacy of intellectual practices and the growth of technologies of social extension." (p. 374). In this context both radical progressives and new vocationalists are seen to reject the subject based curriculum as a form of "grand narrative" (Lyotard 1984). There is, however, a very real sense in which a curriculum studied over time presents a form of narrative, and whilst this may not warrant the sobriquet "grand" it nonetheless presents a tangible and coherent reality which demands both elucidation and interpretation. Chapter 6 will provide an account of the developing structure, philosophy and content of the BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance. It will identify and describe three BEC/BTEC "generations" of the curriculum which appeared before the end of 1992, together with three subsequent NCVQ/QCA inspired GNVQ generations. The chapter will review the developing BEC/BTEC philosophy, entry requirements, structure/design, content, skills focus, assessment regimes, implementation strategies, the prescribed teaching and learning methods, and the monitoring systems employed by BEC/BTEC.

Before moving to a direct consideration of the BEC/BTEC curriculum, however, Chapter 4 which follows will trace developments within the sociology of education, thereby considering some fundamental concepts in curriculum

discourse. This will serve to clarify some of the key terms which will be subsequently utilised and will also afford the opportunity to explore important debates within the sociology of education which have direct relevance to a discussion of vocationalism and to the interpretation of a vocational curriculum. Chapter 4 will also provide an account of developments in further education institutions and in the work of further education lecturers over the period during which the BEC/BTEC curriculum was implemented and operationalised.



## **Chapter Four**

# **IDEOLOGY, THE CURRICULUM, TEACHERS, AND THE ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION**

The market for the Business Education Council, whose First Policy Statement I am now introducing, is the central engine room of British industry, commerce and administration. BEC is not concerned with the limited world of the business school graduate, the brilliant specialist or the outstanding scholar. Its purpose is to raise the standard of education in business studies for the very large number of those who make British business work.

J M Bruce Lockhart (1976)  
(Chairman's Foreward to BEC's First Policy Statement)

In bourgeois society the school has three principle tasks to fulfil. First, it inspires the coming generation of workers with devoted and respect for the capitalist regime. Secondly, it creates from the young of the ruling classes 'cultured' controllers of the working population. Thirdly, it assists capitalist production in the application of the sciences to technique, thus increasing capitalist profit.

Bukharin and Preobrazhensky (1969) (First published in 1919) (p. 279)

The fundamentally economic purpose and utility of vocational education and training (VET) are self-evident and, ostensibly, unremarkable. The BEC/BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance was designed with the demands of employment and the technical needs of employers directly in mind. There are, however, important social (and political) issues which arise in relation to who exactly undertakes VET, and when in their educational development they enrol on such courses. There are also questions relating to the more specific purposes of vocational courses. For what industrial and commercial roles do they seek to prepare learners? What social and economic credibility do they carry? What kind of status do they endow?

These and other questions will be considered in subsequent chapters. As a prelude to this some discussion of the ideological context of VET seems necessary. In particular, in a study which is framed as socio-historical in nature, it is appropriate to examine some of the key terms, concepts and issues which have entered educational debate and analysis, largely through the sociology of education, and which have a bearing on the vocational curriculum and those teaching it.

References were made in Chapters 1 and 3 to some influential work, mostly neo-Marxist, which followed the rise of the “new sociology of education” in England (and beyond) and which was essentially triggered by the publication of *Knowledge and Control* (Young 1971). Some of this work, despite its relative age, will be discussed below on the basis that it has effectively shaped current concepts which are used in thinking about a vocational curriculum. The decline of the sociology of education has been documented by Schilling (1993) and it is now possible, according to Hammersley (1996), “...to speak of its death...” (p. 396). It must be acknowledged that, adjacent to the general crisis of Marxism and the radical/critical project in all its forms, the sociology of education has suffered a significant loss in prestige and influence. Ladwig (1996) critiques what he, from an essentially American perspective, prefers to call the “radical sociology of school knowledge”. Arguing that the theoretical orientation of the sociology of education was responsible for its marginalisation, Ladwig suggests that the construction of a new research agenda should be based on an “...acceptance of science as a means of constructing critically informed technical knowledge...” (p. 163).

Notwithstanding the relatively widespread acknowledgement of a kind of defeat for left/progressive sociological studies of the curriculum and of education generally, powerful contributions have been made from that direction as well as from the wider orbit of "mainstream" sociology. As suggested above, some of the concepts employed have continued utility in thinking about the vocational curriculum as it as emerged and as it as been experienced. One such concept is that of ideology.

### **Ideology, Culture and Hegemony**

Larrain (1982) made a significant contribution to the sociological/philosophical academic debate on ideology which had essentially been triggered by the writings of Althusser (1968 [with Balibar], 1969, 1971b, 1972, 1976). This influential discussion refocussed attention on Marx whose formulation of ideology has remained central to contemporary debates on the subject (Apple 1990, 1993; Pickering 1997). Larrain (1982) considered Marx's articulation of ideology tracing a seeming progression from the "...notion of ideology as inadequate, mis-shapen consciousness to propose ideology as 'the totality of the forms taken as the superstructure of an historical period' (Markovic 1974 p.61)" (p.9). It was Larrain's contention (1982) that for Marx ideology did, in essence, involve a form of distortion,

Ideology does not arise as a pure invention of individual consciousness which distorts reality, nor as the result of an objectively opaque reality which deceives a passive consciousness. Ideology arises from a 'limited material mode of activity' which produces both contradictory relations and, as a consequence, distorted representations about them, thus it unites in one phenomenon, consciousness and reality. This is the reason why ideology cannot be dissolved by mental criticism; it can only be dealt with by solving in practice the social contradictions which give rise to it. (p. 16)



The direct significance of ideology as a key concept in thinking about the nature of education led to a deep interest in it within the sociology of education. This gave rise to an intense and sometimes polemical debate during the 1980s (to be partially outlined below) which continued to resonate in the early 1990s through the contributions of Apple (1993), Avis (1993a and 1993b), Ainley (1993), Education Group 2 (1991), Green (1990), Donald (1992a and 1992b), and Hargreaves (1994).

Ideology then, along with the related concepts of culture and hegemony, forms an important analytical idea in thinking about the vocational curriculum and about educational practice generally. The pervasive nature of the ideas in question means that studies of them often suffer the disability of being situated internally; that is to say that a study of ideology takes place within an environment of ideology. If this contention is accepted then the degree of context consciousness or sensitivity which any particular contribution exhibits must necessarily become an important consideration in any evaluation of its merit. In those instances when ideology is effectively denied, the intellectual product which arises is typically an atheoretical description of the appearance of things. At the opposite end of the spectrum, attempts to produce work which is appropriately sophisticated have sometimes generated over-wrought foot-note laden pieces of angst which rarely move beyond the positing of tentative definitions and yet further calls for "more research". The BEC/BTEC National curriculum, in common with others of a similar type, fails to adequately problematise ideological issues in that it does not, through its aims/content/stated outcomes acknowledge the social antagonisms and

contradictions which should be made explicit in any sensible consideration of organisational structures and behaviours (see Chapter 6).

It is orthodox, perhaps platitudinous, to contend that bourgeois ideology has an hegemonical grip on the political, economic, social and cultural spheres of life in capitalist societies (Gramsci 1971). Divisions of this type may, however, be considered to have limited utility, for the substance of ideology seen in metaphorical terms more closely resembles an amorphous living protoplasm than a crystalline structure. It follows from this that attempts to consider ideology as a phenomenon within a relatively closed area, such as VET, will be fraught with problems. The elusiveness of ideology doubtless partly explains the voluminosity which has characterised associated debates. In view of this tendency the typical succinctness of Musgrove (1979) in his discussion of the "Marxist revival" which dominated the sociology of education during the late 1970s and through the 1980s is refreshing. He explained that,

There are three key men and four key ideas. The three key men are Gramsci, Althusser and Bourdieu; the four (closely related) concepts are hegemony, legitimacy, ideology and reproduction. (p. 22)

On the whole, Musgrove offered an eloquently stated, if lachrymose, critique of the Marxist and neo-Marxist contributions which dominated the sociology of education at that time. Marxist approaches (along with phenomenological perspectives) were charged with having led, "...at best to absurdity and at the worst to actual harm in the recent conduct of education." (p. 14). It would be over a decade, however, before such sentiments would become, if not mainstream, at least ones which might be met with a degree of

acknowledgement that something had gone badly wrong (Schilling 1993; Hammersley 1996; Ladwig 1996).

The theory of ideology is itself an important and voluminous area of scholarly endeavour. In a landmark paper Larrain (1982) acknowledged the value of work undertaken in this field by scholars such as Hirst, Laclau, Coward and Althusser, but argued that much of it was flawed by a limited understanding of the contribution made by Marx. As outlined above, Larrain characterised Marx's concept of ideology as being a "negative one", that is one which sees ideology as necessarily incorporating distortion of the truth; in effect, a masking of social reality by a veil of illusions. The argument proceeded to contend that "...the identification of ideology with an objective level of social reality separated from consciousness is...problematic." (p. 9). This was supported by analysis of the concept of "ideological superstructure", re-assertion of the role of the subject as active producer rather than passive object, and a concern that the role of consciousness in ideology should not be excluded by a wholly material thesis. Education Group (1981) acknowledged a debt to Larrain's earlier work in arguing that,

Ideas are properly called ideological when they can be shown to conceal or to resolve in an idealistic or imaginary way the problematic character of social life. In the process of presenting a particular social order as harmonious, natural or in need of rescue from subversion or decay, ideological accounts serve also to secure the position of dominant social groups. (p. 28)

It is on the above basis that the vocational curriculum in England, as exemplified by the BTEC National Diploma, must be considered as profoundly ideological in its content and ethos. The passage from Education Group



(1981) quoted above describes well the way in which the various versions of the BEC/BTEC curriculum (which will be outlined in Chapter 6) have subsequently developed and operated. Ideology is an important constitutive element in the construction of hegemony.

As stated in Chapter 2 above, the concept of hegemony is the central idea associated with Gramsci (1971), and a substantial quantity of secondary literature has developed around it. In Chapter 2 the definition provided by Boggs (1976), in which he described hegemony as a system of values supportive of the established order, was quoted (see page 49 above). Leversha (1977) usefully criticised Boggs by emphasising that the concept of hegemony should be stressed to be something which is not merely 'culturalist' but a firmly materialist one relating to the social relations of power in society. In particular the notion of hegemony accounts for the means whereby the ruling class maintains its domination over the oppressed classes (as also over the other classes in the ruling bloc) without recourse to blatant repression. The model of non-advanced vocational education developed by BEC/BTEC (and, even more so, the NCVQ model which followed it), internalises the values and practises of the dominant mode of production and presents them in a non-problematic way. In this respect it constitutes an element in the maintenance of hegemony. In reality it moves beyond the culturalism of its traditional academic alternative (GCE A Levels) to offer a learning experience which is debilitated by being materially grounded not only in capitalistic ideology but also in attempts to reflect attendant work practices.

It is important, then, when considering movements and trends (and the possibility of movements and trends) in the spheres of cultural and education to maintain a proper sense of proportion. Apple (1993a) identifies the notion of *authoritarian populism*, formulated by Hall (1980), as an explanation of the political dominance of the 'New Right' in the United States and Great Britain over the past twenty years. Apple argues that Reaganism and Thatcherism, far from creating "false consciousness" actually connected with "...the perceived needs, fears, and hopes of groups of people who felt threatened by the range of problems associated with the crises in authority relations in culture, in the economy, and in politics." (p. 22). Educational concerns in Britain have frequently reflected this over the period in question, with the emphasis on issues such as a return to "traditional morality" ("back to basics"), "free choice", "standards", and the needs of business. Apple (1993b) is keen to stress that dominant ideologies are not "inscribed", that their privileged position has to be won and that "shifts" are possible.

Rachel Sharp (1980) constructed a systematic account of ideology and hegemony and discussed the concepts directly in relation to schooling, according some prominence to the notion of "culture clash" as an expression of the moving equilibrium of hegemony. For Sharp the tendency of progressive liberal theory to explain the failure of working class pupils in terms of their inability to successfully assimilate the middle class culture of the school was not satisfactory. Sharp argued the need to refer to the content of culture "...its material embeddedness in concrete social practices, its socio-historic genesis and its causal efficacy..." (p. 133). What is

transmitted in schools and colleges is not middle class culture but the dominant hegemonic ideology which incorporates elements from other social classes, including not only the aristocracy but also some aspects of the ideology of subordinate classes (an ideology which is "...penetrated by notions, practices and routines emanating from the hegemonic system..." (ibid.). What happens in schools and colleges is not so much a straight "war of cultures" but rather a synthesis of several cultures which already link and inter-penetrate in complex ways. Apple and Weis (1985) employed the concepts of "structure" (defined as consisting of the economic, cultural/ideological and political spheres of society), and "agency" (represented by the "dynamics" of gender, race, class and age). The relationship between structure and agency allows for active participation in cultural practices as well as a degree of determination by the process of ideology. The Apple and Weis model, though criticised for the vagueness of its deployment of the terms "process" (Smith 1987), was credited with having documented the relational quality of ideology and shown the school to be a site "...in which the day to day relations and practices are at once reproductive and contradictory..." (p. 393).



## The Curriculum and Reproduction

- . ..the bourgeoisie has obliterated its name in passing from reality to representation, from economic to mental man.  
Barthes (1993) (p. 138)

Parkin (1979) argues that the concept of cultural capital rests uneasily within a Marxist analysis, "...cultural capital and credentialism...are notions that do not readily fit into the vocabulary of production, other than as mere epiphenomena" (p. 59). Whilst this might be true of a certain kind of Marxist analysis it does not sufficiently recognise the theoretical developments which followed Gramsci's (1971) contribution in rejecting one-dimensional interpretations of Marx. Of more interest is that Parkin's sentiment suggests by implication that studies which evade the question of production relations have the utility of seeming to negate radical critiques. The "cultural deprivation" debate which emerged in the late 1960s may afford a representative example of this. Cultural deprivation was typically not related to production relations and the associated debate was orientated towards perceived effects, inadequate welfare facilities, and the formulation of mitigating social strategies. By treating "deprivation" as a cultural deficit the focus of attention was shifted away from a consideration of the causes of inequality and repression.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) argued that schools perpetuate and transmit the dominant culture. They suggested that the education system must both conserve and reproduce bourgeois culture; where it has malfunctioned in this task the term "culturally deprived" has sometimes been used to describe the

defective subject. This impulse to transform has been explained in the following by Barthes (1993),

The petit-bourgeois is a man unable to imagine the other. If he comes face to face with him, he blinds himself, ignores and denies him, or else transforms him into himself...any otherness is reduced to sameness (p.151)...even if he is unable to experience the other in himself, the bourgeois can at least imagine the place where he fits in: this is known as liberalism, which is a sort of intellectual equilibrium based on recognised places (p.152).

The type of analysis made by Labov (1973), which argues that those typically classified as culturally deprived are merely different but "equal", appears to neglect the issues of cultural imperialism and cultural conflict. The presence of context bound class cultures and subcultures which are literally materially degraded is not the same thing as the existence of cultural deprivation though it can be explained in that way. Claims to universal cultural equality (as opposed to value) without reference to the history of a given society, family or individual may be considered naive.

The concept of a "Legitimation Crisis" in contemporary capitalism carries an indelible association with the work of Jurgen Habermas (1976). Burrell and Morgan (1979) (pp. 296-299) have succinctly outlined the direction of Habermas's contribution which they characterise as "...a concern to update the Hegelian-Marxist critique..." (p. 296). This attempted "modernisation" has primarily involved a concern with the "superstructure" and a consequent relegation of economic analysis. Buswell (1984) discusses Habermas's concepts of "structural depoliticisation" and "civic privatism". Structural depoliticisation refers to the tendency for the bureaucracies and general

systems of society (such as education) to be divested of overt political symbolism. Civic privatism is defined by Buswell as referring to

...political abstinence combined with orientations to career, leisure and consumption and (it) incorporates elements of an achievement ideology transferred to the educational system... (p. 45)

Each of Habermas's twin concepts is seen by Buswell as a necessary requirement for the maintenance of capitalism, and each is regarded as subject to varying actual and potential crisis which may be political or ideological but which in either case is likely to be economic in its derivation. This is to say that a specific crisis within the structure of capitalism is often traceable to a general crisis of production. Habermas, Buswell argues

...points out that the spread of organised rationality undermines the cultural traditions that are important for legitimacy and which cannot be regenerated administratively. Another tendency is the 'motivational crisis' at the level of the individual...partly because of 'overloading' with respect to new demands which cannot be met - and the most important motivation contributed by the socio-cultural system is that of privatism which legitimates the whole structure. Habermas considers that the socio-cultural system will not be able, in the long run, to reproduce the privatistic syndrome necessary for the continuance of the system. (ibid. p. 45)

Changes in the social structure are seen as eroding the possibilities of individual achievement and it is argued that an expansion of the educational system independent of the occupational structure and its attendant career and job opportunities has taken place. Contentions of this scale open up a vast range of hypotheses to be explored and the discussion which follows must, necessarily, be relatively circumscribed. This containment will be sought by an attempt to concentrate on issues arising out of contributions made by Hickox (1982), Hargreaves (1982), and Bauman (1992).



In relation to his discussion of "Correspondence Theory", the idea that there is a more or less direct relationship between the social relations of production and the social relations of education, Hickox (1982) referred to two propositions which occurred throughout Marxist contributions to the sociology of education. The first of these was that

...processes of educational differentiation and certification exist in order to provide an apparently neutral and objective legitimation for the unequal and hierarchical division of labour within capitalism. (p. 567)

The second proposition was stated to

...hold that education in capitalist societies transmits 'appropriate' attitudes and work habits to each strata of the occupational hierarchy (p. 567).

In relation to the use of mass education as an instrument of social control Hickox asks if

...there evidence that mass education has in fact been at all effective in fulfilling this function?

Hickox argued that the "English experience" does not offer much evidence of that kind. Some deficiencies in the Hickox paper were noted by Nash (1984) and, indeed, subsequently acknowledged to some degree by the author himself (Hickox 1984), but a number of points warrant further discussion.

Has mass education been effective in terms of imposing or creating a form of social control? Certainly a significant proportion of school pupils are visibly alienated from school (as evidenced by the existence of antagonistic subcultures and truancy). Also, there has been a clear and statistically massive failure of the working class in schools (measured in terms of

examination performance and literacy levels). Alienation and failure then are both important elements in the experience of schooling for many pupils. On the whole, however, it is the case that pupils who fail do not become rebels, for it is clear that the vast majority of working class (and other) pupils, at least on the surface, accept the process of schooling to which they are subjected in a relatively pliant way. Similar attitudes of compliance are the stereo-typical hallmark of the wider society in Britain, and if small-scale urban riots appear regularly within British social history it is more as punctuation than script. This and other contentions made above have been unsupported by either empirical data or authoritative references, and the charge of impressionistic polemicism would be difficult to refute. More specificity is required if the case made by Hickox is to be accorded due respect.

In a discussion of IQ testing the American Marxists Bowles and Gintis (1977) argued that a role of the education system is to legitimate the hierarchical division of labour in capitalist society. Hickox (1982) was apparently unconvinced, for he refers to evidence which suggests that educational qualifications

...are likely to be relatively inefficient as a means of providing a neutral legitimisation for differences within the hierarchical division of labour. (pp. 569-570)

Work by Richard Scase indicating that only 2.5 per cent of a sample of English workers ranked educational qualifications as an important determinant of class is cited (p. 571). What is more, the "lads" who were the subject of Willis's (1977) *Learning to Labour* are called in for support. They, "...display an obvious contempt for theoretical knowledge of any kind." (Hickox

1982 p. 571) It is contended here that firstly, it is not the possession of educational qualifications by those in positions of authority which legitimise the hierarchical division of labour, but rather the non-possession of meaningful certification by the lower strata which helps to hold them uncritically in place. The issue of *which* qualifications is important here, and evidence in relation to this question with specific regard to the BEC/BTEC National Diploma will be presented in Chapter 7. Secondly, qualifications are patently not a determinant of social class. The reverse is the case. Finally, much of the "contempt" shown by Willis's lads, not only for theoretical knowledge but for all that is external to their group may be interpreted as "theatrical" expression of their alienation. Comments of one of the lads (Joey) on reading a draft of Willis's book included the following

(...) I thought we were the artists of the school, because of the things we did, I thought definitely we had our own sort of art form, the things we used to get up ...

...something should have been done with us, I mean there was so much talent there... (p. 195)

Common experience of traditional working class attitudes to the mysteries of educational achievement as expressed by paper qualifications suggests not contempt, but a deep seated, and utterly misplaced awe laced with faith. Alisdair Gray's (1984) novel *1982 Janine* provides an instance which though it is both fiction and mild parody, reflects this feeling rather well,

"But working men can't run their own industries", cried Dad, then blushed and clearly wished he had used other words. After a pause Old Red said, "Spoken like a true member of the British Labour Party", "I understand the point you're making", said Dad. "The Bar Association is run by lawyers and the Medical Association by doctors, why not have a railway system managed by engine drivers and stationmasters? You must know the answer to that. Only people with university degrees have the training to direct large organisations. But in less than twenty years the new education grants will have produced a completely



different breed of managers, folk whose fathers and mothers are working folk like ourselves". (p. 142)

Hickox (1982) suggests that

...It is difficult to see how many of the working class attitudes and values which Willis sees as being reproduced through education, the refusal to co-operate with authority for example, are compatible with the needs of capital. (p. 574)

It would be naive to argue that *all* the attitudes and values acquired by the working class through schooling are compatible with capital, although vocational provision overtly addresses this "problem" by inculcating appropriate managerial values. The argument made by Hargreaves (1982) is relatively sophisticated in pointing to the immense diversity and complexity of pupils' responses and in questioning "...the very applicability of the category of 'resistance' to vast and diverse areas of pupil conduct..." (p. 112). This echoes reservations expressed above with regard to the extent of pupil rebellion. Hargreaves (1982) suggests that many Marxist commentators have too readily identified resistance in school pupils. The moving equilibrium of hegemony requires that the school should function as an agent of socialisation on the terms of the dominant culture. As discussed above, Althusser (1971b) has given the Educational Ideological State Apparatus the dominant position in his analysis of mature capitalist social formations. It should be noted, however, that Althusser placed great emphasis on its alliance with the family in the transmission of the ruling ideology. The school facilitates some aspects of the process of embourgeoisification for the "ear 'oles", (as Willis termed the pliant pupils in his *Learning to Labour* study); the mass of potential dissent is incorporated before it has the opportunity to

formulate the required consciousness for resistance. The luxury of repressive tolerance can be afforded for any residual opposition. This sophisticated control mechanism has been accounted for in the following way,

The class which has the means of material production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby...the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. Marx (1977) (p. 176)

Bauman (1992) identifies the institutionalisation of knowledge based expertise as the mode through which "panoptical" power (a form of surveillance) is exercised in modern corporations. Foucault's (1991) exposition of the "panopticism" has been discussed above (see Chapter 2 p. 64-65). This has given rise to a power so potent that, Bauman (1992) persuasively argues, the notion of "legitimation crisis" in relation to capitalism as an economic and political system has been rendered obsolete. There is now a propensity for social relations to sustain and reproduce themselves without the threat of significant challenge from any quarter, and most particularly without opposition from intellectuals whose power has been effectively appropriated. This operates not only at the level of policy formation, but also at the "micro-level" of the school or college. Hoggart (1995) has evocatively described the marginalisation of creative teaching as a consequence of "extremes of 'vocationalism'" having led to an environment where there was "None of that old-fashioned nonsense about the wondering student asking speculative questions." (p. 38). Bauman (1992) suggests that anti-intellectualism is a key characteristic of the postmodern world and represents a swing in the bureaucratic state's pendulum of interest, away from a need for traditional

empirical research based broadly on the social sciences and towards a desire for more management knowledge and technology. The macro orientation of much critical sociological analysis has been described both as a strength and a weakness; attempts at correcting the perceived weakness were made by a number of studies which may now be regarded as landmarks within the sociology of education including Sharp and Green (1975), Corrigan (1979), and Willis (1977). More recently Bates (1990) and Riseborough (1992) have conducted critical small scale ethnographic studies which focus specifically on BTEC Fashion Design and BTEC Catering and Hotel Management students respectively.

Analysis of the form and content of the school curriculum occupies a prominent position within explanations of hegemony, cultural reproduction, and socialisation into the acceptance of capitalistic values and morals. An important concept within perspectives focusing on the school has undoubtedly been that of the "hidden curriculum". Giroux (1983) points to the multiplicity of definitions of the hidden curriculum which have been generated but nonetheless identifies a "definitional thread" which perceives it "...as those unstated norms, values, and beliefs embedded in and transmitted to students through the underlying rules that structure routines and social relationships in school and classroom life." (p. 47). It will be apparent from evidence presented in Chapter 6 that the vocational curriculum is where many aspects of the hidden curriculum become visible.



Giroux attempted to inject new life into the hidden curriculum concept by suggesting that it should be seen as "...more than an interpretative tool buttressed with good intentions" (p. 61) (ibid.). Drawing on Adorno and the Frankfurt school Giroux calls for a concern to analyse and act upon the "structured silence" which is present within schools on matters of class and social structure, a silence which is evident in the essentially uncritical reproduction of the wider society's social relations of domination within the context of school. Teachers are, in Giroux's argument, seen as situated in a position which gives the opportunity for a counter-hegemonic intervention. It is important to ask how real this opportunity is. Also, how many teachers would wish to take the opportunity if it was both real and evident? Cullingford (1991) presents evidence that a great many teachers see the purposes of schooling as primarily social, and that they stress the function of equipping pupils to cope in society over and above the meeting of academic targets. The general social development of pupils was found to be a far stronger concern for teachers than was the purpose of curriculum subjects.

Clearly, and for many reasons, analysis of the hidden curriculum has made little contribution to concrete practice in schools. Whatever the intellectual merit or, indeed, the truth of critical contributions to educational debates within the United Kingdom, their origin will effectively act as a disqualification in the minds of many influential thinkers and/or administrators who have managerial positions within the education system as well as access to the governmental sphere where policies are made. Perhaps it is the consequential impotence in the sphere of practical politics which partly

accounts for the frequent acrimony which can arise within internecine debates on the Left. It must be conceded that real weaknesses exist within what has been created. Williamson (1985) has quite properly drawn attention to a dearth of proposals from the Left relating to practical "chalk-face" considerations such as

...how to deal with a large group of noisy, aggressive, even violent pupils, or...how to persuade totally silent and withdrawn students to speak up and gain confidence. These two situations are probably the two most basic, repeated teaching problems most teachers experience in a classroom... (p. 91)

This is an omission and one which is, perhaps, ironic given that it is probable that the chief insights provided by Marxists in relation to the curriculum are concerned not so much with content of lessons as with processes [see Willis (1977) and Corrigan (1979)].

The demise of progressive romanticism has led to some Marxists seeming to champion traditional conservative authoritarianism in relation to curriculum content and method. Harold Entwistle's (1979) positivistic reading of Gramsci (see Chapter 2) in which he is interpreted as an advocate of traditional pedagogy is an example of this. Aspects of the many contributions made over the years by Bernstein, Bourdieu and, to a lesser extent, Young, suggest the immense complexity of issues surrounding the curriculum. These issues are doubtless made more difficult still by the fact that the curriculum, like the school or college, is not a "black box" mechanism acting in a relatively isolated fashion. Questions of cause and effect are critical in considering such questions and the process whereby society is reproduced is of paramount importance. A curriculum is generally the route to an award, and the

effectiveness of that credential as a passport to employment or higher education is, so far as most students are concerned, the acid test of its value. Chapter 7 will present the views of various parties on the extent to which the BEC/BTEC National Diploma has "opened doors" for those holding the award.

The notion that schools have a reproduction function has been discussed in relation to economic relations, social classes, culture and other more specific elements of society. Primary contributors to the development of ideas emphasising this function of schooling have been Althusser (1971a), Apple (1979), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Willis (1977) and, most prominently, Bowles and Gintis (1976). "Over-view" accounts of these ideas, including the controversial "correspondence principle", can be found in Sarup (1978), Sharp (1980), and Apple (1990). Bowles and Gintis (1976) used the term "correspondence" to refer to a perceived similarity between the social relations present in educational contexts and those to be found in industrial production. It is argued that this

...not only inures the student to the discipline of the work place, but develops the types of personal demeanour, modes of self-presentation, self-image, and social class identifications which are the crucial ingredients of job adequacy. (p.131)

Demaine (1981) provided a lucid account which it would probably be fair to categorise, in political terms, as "[Old] Labourite". A stringently anti-Marxist critique may be found in Musgrove (1979) and some Marxist reappraisals surfaced in various papers in Barton, Meigham and Walker (1980). Erben and Gleeson (1977) criticised Althusser's "famous" Ideological State Apparatus approach to reproduction on the grounds that its determinism left him unable



to account for the upsurge of student radicalism in 1968 (p. 68). \_ Arnot and Whitty (1982) discussed the reformulation of theory in this area. It is to the liberal critique provided by Hargreaves (1982) however, that the discussion which follows will initially be orientated.

Hargreaves outlines the 'career' of the reproduction thesis as applied to schooling in the field of Marxist scholarship and proceeds to make a number of significant criticisms. An alleged about-turn by Apple (1981) on the question of the correspondence thesis is represented, along with the work of Giroux (1981) as "...a substantial theoretical shift within the Marxist sociology of education." (p. 111). This "shift" is accounted for as a desire on the part of Marxists to see "resistances" in schools because of the opportunities which these would present for the precipitation of a socialist transformation. This fundamental problem is regarded by Hargreaves as arising out of the existence in Marxist contributions of a political commitment which interferes with the task of producing a purely social scientific explanation (p. 115). Of particular interest here are views presented on the "relative autonomy theory".

As Hargreaves explains, the relative autonomy theory claims that schooling is relatively autonomous from the sphere of production. That is to suggest that there is a partial independence from the requirements of production and that this therefore provides for the possibility of counter-hegemonic activities within schools. This question of relative autonomy arises in Marxist considerations of many different facets of capitalism, including the State itself. Marxist proponents of the relative autonomy of schools, as Hargreaves indicates,

have stressed the school's simultaneous dependence on and independence from the economy. This position, which is basically a recognition of questions of degree/balance/ ratio of influences is, according to Hargreaves, justified by "...the fall back position of economy determination in the last instance..." (p. 117). Hargreaves quite correctly points out that this position lacks a mature empirical analysis of factors such as the dependence/ independence present in relations between schools and local government. Such a study of the bureaucratic and political machinery behind the classroom would, however, require an extremely large scale long term project.

David Reynolds (1984) acknowledged that evidence in the early 1980s of creeping vocationalism in the curriculum and the management emphasis on "cost effectiveness" in education suggests a certain inadequacy in the Relative Autonomy thesis. Reynolds proceeded to outline developments within the Reproduction debate, from early correspondence theories influenced by Althusserian determinism through to a relative autonomy theory which (in its extreme form) grants a very high degree of autonomy from the economic base. Four developments which suggest "considerable freedom" for the British education system to act "...either in a reproductive or transformative fashion..." (p. 292) were identified. The first of these is the existence of "...massive evidence of lack of fit..." between products of education and the needs of industry. Secondly, "...recent developments in Social Science/Social Policy Studies..." were interpreted as suggesting that the State is too incompetent to impose its will and that in any case it makes "...concessions which range beyond what is strictly economically necessary..."

(p. 295). Thirdly, the "partial penetration" of British capitalism was cited; Reynolds's argument was that the traditionally anti-industrial attitudes of the gentry make schools one of several institutions where capital did not go unchallenged. Fourthly, Reynolds pointed to "...the Independence of the School..." which he saw as "...determining the nature of the wider society as well as being determined by it..." (p. 296). The argument which Reynolds constructed accepted both a large degree of economic determination and the reproduction of capitalist production relations as a "primary role" of the education system. It rejected economic determination "in the last instance" and stressed the power of certain "non-material" influences (examples given are religious factors, traditions and gender relations).

Essentially, Reynolds appeared to regard the relative autonomy theory as one which had great potential which was repressed by paradigmatic divisions (macro deterministic/micro "free will" ethnographers) within the sociology of education. Research into relative autonomy was seen as offering something for both camps, that is an opportunity for conciliation; in a telling passage he argued that

...it does actually make possible a sociology of education, whereas determinist Marxist reduces our discipline to being merely the educational implications of economic or political structure, an epiphenomena of economics or politics. (p. 300)

Determinist Marxists are seen as formulating resistance theory in relation to pupils whilst ignoring the transformatory potential of the staff who work in the system. These same determinists have "...intellectually greatly harmed Marxism..." (p. 302); invoking an affinity [at that time] with Classical Marxism Reynolds had relative autonomy theory suggesting, "...not that humans are



either free or determined but that there are both determinations and freedoms. It sees humans as influenced and influencing." (p. 302) Issues of human freedom and of human agency, which are always crucial in educational contexts, are amplified within vocational education where assumptions about the nature of work and social relations are rarely openly questioned.

Human potentialities of course are always set in the context of specific power relations. It is important to ask in a particular situation or structure "who controls who and why?" Giroux (1983) identified the paradigmatic problems referred to above in terms of "...failure to develop a theory of schooling that dialectically links structure and human agency..." (p. 75). Extant theories of reproduction were criticised in terms of disallowing the possibility of counter-hegemonic struggles, and the need to move beyond theories of social and cultural reproduction is strongly stated. The accounts provided by Willis (1977), Hebdige (1979) and Corrigan (1979) were seen as instances of "good practice" in terms of integrating critical social theory with ethnographic method. In essence Giroux argued for a shift of focus away from the structures of reproduction to the process of resistance which are contained within both the system and the individual; this way radical pessimism might give way to an invigorating optimism.

Much of the "pessimism" with regard to the prospect of socialist transformation which Giroux (1983), Reynolds (1984) and many others bemoan is explained in terms of the limitations which an acceptance of the

reproduction thesis places on struggle. Paul Willis (1983) in a critical discussion of his influential *Learning to Labour*, a contribution which has fostered both celebrations of resistance and 'tight' reproduction arguments, seeks to identify a way forward. Willis sees *Learning to Labour* as set within the 'Reproduction' perspective, highlighting the role of schools in actively producing inequality. What prevents the pupils from being reduced to passive "zombies" in Willis's account is the "cultural studies" perspective with which he infuses his work; something which he describes as a concern with "...the specifically human and collective activity of *making meaning* - the making sense, if you will, of a structural location: a position in a social relationship and mode of production..." (p. 112). There is a recognition and acceptance of structural determination of human agents who will typically behave in expected and largely predictable ways; actions will tend to concur with expectations related to gender, class and so on. Willis's recognition of determination, however, allows for creative human capacity in interpretation of that which is received, a possibility for invention which is not limitless but (in varying degrees) constrained. This ability to produce meaning is characterised as "cultural production", that is the ability to manufacture forms of knowledge from materials which are neither borrowed, appropriated or learned from the bourgeoisie.

Willis (1983) regarded Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) analysis of the transmission of power and privilege based on cultural capital by means of "symbolic violence" within the education system as an important contribution. Bourdieu's work was seen as an advance on that of Althusser (1971), whose

own work in its way constituted "...an advance on liberal positions..." (Willis 1983 p. 115). The former is criticised for invoking "the ghost" of the problem which is seen as flawing the latter, for the symbolic violence which Bourdieu has enforcing a "cultural arbitrary" is a violence based on "...the fixed universe..." (ibid. p. 119) of the economy

It is only...in a material notion of cultural production working on and in the contradictions of the dominant Mode of Production that we can reach the notion of structured and durable social relations of power at all. For all the richness of the Bourdieu system, agency, struggle, variety, have again been banished from history. Capital, even for the powerful, becomes an inert possession... (ibid. p. 119).

For Willis, extant theories of "Reproduction" made the mistake of viewing cultural production in an overly mechanistic fashion, there was an assumption that the next set of produced relations would necessarily be as the last, thus denying the possibility of different outcomes. The important task is formulated as the need to produce "...a properly dialectical notion of 'Reproduction'." (p. 125). This would involve a consideration of other "processes and sites" beyond the school, a kind of universalism of vision which seems to make more sense than the concern implied by Reynolds (1984) to, in effect, defend the sociology of education (almost as a profession?) from the encroachment of a particular approach.

Willis did not claim to provide an advanced framework for the creation of a dialectical theory of reproduction, but he did successfully point to a kind of bonded tension between reproduction and resistance which is internal to human praxis. Clearly, the area of reproduction theory in Marxist scholarship has undergone a fairly substantial transformation. As early as 1980 Gintis and Bowles (1980) criticised their own work (Bowles and Gintis 1976) which has



for many years now been upheld as the exemplar of "vulgar" determinism in this field. Although reproduction theories have been subjected to severe criticism and are currently unfashionable it is not impossible that empirically informed insights may yet restore some confidence in the thesis and assist the construction of a dialectically sound model. The vocational curriculum expressly aims to serve business, to improve production and managerial technique, to produce a motivated workforce with appropriate attitudes. It could, perhaps, hardly be otherwise. Notwithstanding this, there is no reason why these attributes should not co-exist with a knowledge of alternatives, a sense of context, and the ability to think *outside* of the sanctified tracks of technology/business. No vocational curriculum in the non-advanced sector in England has seriously engaged with the traditions of historical/humanistic/social scientific disciplines.

## Teachers

Sociological studies of teachers often carry the same sense of inadequacy which some see as accompanying police investigations into their own alleged misdemeanours. Perhaps teaching institutions are one more aspect of human society where fiction may (often inadvertently) show more of the reality than empirical research can hope to represent. The schoolmaster/mistress figure is a staple stereotype of English Literature and many of the classic characters have negotiated the transition from text to screen. Bradbury's (1977) *History Man*, Russell's (1986) *Educating Rita* and Sharpe's (1978) *Wilt* are amongst the most prominent English post-compulsory sector based fictions which indicate of the continued potency of "the educator" as a significant social

symbol. A similar fascination and modernisation process can be traced in the evolution of popular music as well as in other media products (see Fisher 1997). An analysis of the teacher in literature and the attendant social meanings of fictional representations would constitute an absorbing project, but the aim here must be confined to a consideration of certain sociological fragments which seem apposite to the wider context of this study.

The role of teachers, and the purpose of the particular curriculum taught within a given context, have been subject to considerable debate both within the teaching profession and beyond. Hargreaves (1994) has examined the work of teachers specifically in relation to the notion of postmodernism. What teachers do, who teachers are, and what is taught are all factors which have an effect on individuals, (students, parents, employers and so on), and upon the wider society which both facilitates and benefits from the educational process. Marxist scholars have generally been concerned to examine the ways in which schooling has been subordinate to the demands of capital rather than to the needs of individuals and of the wider community. Capitalism is charged with having successfully utilised the school as a producer of human resources which are appropriate for exploitation by those entrenched in positions of power and privilege. By this logic teachers, as a profession, are *de facto* agents of capitalism. This type of argument, which is related in logic to the "conspiracy theory" view of society, is easy to make. What follows below is an attempt to examine the evidence and to review some explanations of teachers and the curriculum within capitalism.

The conflict model of schooling is also a conflict view of teaching as an activity. Teaching is seen at least as a formal intervention into the social sphere of young people and properly regarded as a legal imposition. A key concept in the debate surrounding the job of teaching is that of "professionalism". There is a substantial body of both sociological and management literature concerned with definitions of the professional individual and the nature of professional work. This academic discussion of professionalism generally takes place within the popular understanding that professional status is an important asset, an indisputable mark of respectability. It is against this background that in the annual pay bargaining for teachers both parties invariably attempt to use some notion of professionalism as a negotiating lever.

Education Group (1981) attribute the teachers' self-concept as professionals to the influence brought upon them during the 1960s a time when "...social democratic politicians made an alliance..." (p. 89) with them. The discussion is developed by arguing with reference to contemporary political speeches and publications, that the roles of trade unionist and politician were presented as "negative images" for teachers; these images were sometimes contrasted to those of fledgling technocrats who by dint of "professional self-government" had the potential to transform themselves into the epitome of the socially responsible politically neutral citizen. It seems likely that this view of the teacher, or some similar laudatory representation, remains genuinely attractive to many involved in such work, and perhaps especially to those who seek to present a role model to pupils/students.



Lawn and Ozga (1981) criticised studies which categorised teachers as middle class professionals. Adopting a perspective which views teachers as an element within the labour movement, they focused upon teaching as a labour process, specifically considering computerisation in schools as an aspect of this. Their paper reviews definitions of the term "professionalism", and acknowledges both the complexity and historically specific quality of the concept, before going on to suggest that professionalism may be regarded as a "...way of challenging the employers control of the labour process..." (p. 47). Lawn and Ozga (ibid.) proceeded to elaborate strands of Braverman's (1974) influential de-skilling thesis to argue that the experience of teachers has more in common with proletarianisation than professionalisation. The idea of proletarianisation of teachers is not without its appeal, if this is a trend however; it exists at a time when there is what might be crudely characterised as a bourgeoisification of the proletariat in process, Gorz (1982) comments on the way in which,

Jobs have tended to become 'intellectualised' - that is, to require mental rather than manual operations - without stimulating or satisfying intellectual capacities in any way. Hence the impossibility for workers to identify with 'their' work and to feel that they belong to the working class. (p. 7)

It would perhaps be over-stating the case to suggest that there is a convergence between jobs of the type referred to in the above quoted passage and teaching as an activity. Teachers/lecturers would not constitute suitable inhabitants in the "non-class of non-workers" which Gorz postulates, for they belong to that broad category of "skilled workers" which could not countenance the abolition of the work through which they identify and define

themselves. The aim of teachers/lecturers is not to abolish their work but to appropriate it, that is, to win control of it. It is reasonable to ask, if traditional blue-collar workers find it increasingly difficult to see themselves as working class, then what price teachers/lecturers? By the mid 1990s Lawn (1996) was arguing that the modern teacher was not a stable concept, being defined not only by technical skills (radically altered by the introduction of a centralised curriculum), but also by the social and political policies which might be ascendent at a particular time.

Harris (1982) (pp. 70-73) discussed the employment resemblances between teachers and the working class. Citing factors such as political calls for more teacher accountability and "efficiency", the likelihood that teachers are to be progressively required to educate fewer numbers of people to a lower general level, and a perceived de-skilling of teachers, Harris suggested, like Lawn and Ozga (1981) before him, that a process of proletarianisation was in motion. Buswell (1980) has conducted research on aspects of curriculum change, including content packaging and new pedagogic techniques, and their effects on teachers and pupils. Buswell too predicted an increase in the number of proletarianised teachers, as with Lawn and Ozga (ibid.) the argument was indebted to the deskilling thesis presented by Braverman (1974). Some reservations with regard to the idea of the proletarianisation of teachers have been made above. An earlier call for caution was made by Young and Whitty (1977) who suggested that an analysis "...purely in terms of a straightforward proletarianisation of teachers...", (p. 230) would be a mistake. They remind us that class is a relationship and not a thing, and urge

an analysis *vis-a-vis* teachers relations with pupils. Teachers have a "distinctive character" as "reproducers of labour",

Just as factory workers can begin to transform their experience of alienation in the workplace through collective action and political struggle reproduction in the classrooms and the schools. It is for this reason that questions of curriculum and teaching methods remain crucial... (pp. 230-231)

Before turning to the question of how the vocational curriculum as exemplified by the BEC/BTEC National Diploma and the attendant teaching/learning methods have impacted on further education lecturers it is appropriate to consider the changing character of further education colleges as places of work. Long before the incorporation of colleges in 1993 management processes had been profoundly changing the culture of the colleges. That these changes were broadly evident from about the time (1979) that BEC entered the colleges may well be attributed to the rise of the same political and social forces which had facilitated the birth of a re-invigorated conservatism.



## **The Further Education College as a Workplace in Transition**

It is essential that Principals have a firm grasp of modern management techniques so that they have a better knowledge of such matters as performance statistics and a better understanding of the principles of delegation and control. It would seem that 'crash' courses in management for existing Principals are worthy of consideration.

From *The Administration of Technical Colleges*.  
Charlton, Gent, and Scammels (1971) (p. 153)

...management training in the sector is patchy and of uneven quality. We look forward to the national framework for management development based on standards of best business practice being completed by the summer to provide a coherent structure for the training of college managers...Since the incorporation of further education colleges there have been concerns about the style of working and remoteness of governing bodies. Some have encouraged a confrontational management style which is unacceptable in publicly funded bodies.

*The Learning Age* (DfEE 1998) (p. 58)

Although BTEC programmes have formed part of the curriculum menu offered by schools and Sixth Form Colleges they are predominantly located with the provision of further education (FE) colleges. In discussing the BEC/BTEC National Diploma as a written curriculum it is therefore necessary to briefly consider some aspects of further education colleges as institutions. The FE colleges provide the context in which the curriculum is generally operationalised and the environment where students and lecturers consume, implement, and act upon that what is formally set down in the documents which will be discussed in Chapter 6. The FE sector is large. In 1997 there were 452 FE colleges in England (Huddleston and Unwin 1997), and the institutions within it are relatively diverse in terms of their histories, structures, and provision. Despite this heterogeneity, many people have a clear idea of what a further education college (or "Tech") is. The image is not generally a flattering one. Shabby buildings, "second chance" students who have underachieved at school, low status non-academic (vocational) courses, and

under qualified staff are some of the characteristics which might be ascribed. Hoggart (1995), amongst others, has referred to FE as the "Cinderella Sector". The *Further and Higher Education Act* (DES 1992) which removed the colleges from Local authority control dramatically transformed further education although many of the factors which have been attributed to "independence" were embedded in the colleges long before 1992. One of these was the objectives/performance based curriculum/learning model of which BEC/BTEC was the prime exemplar. Recent overviews of the sector have been provided by Huddleston and Unwin (1997) and Armitage, Bryant, Dunnill, Hammersley, Hayes, Hudson, and Lawes (1999). The Annual Reports produced by FEFC provide authoritative and detailed statistical data.

One supposed characteristic of the "New FE" is a fascination with performance measurement. This is reflected both in the tendency for the vocational curriculum to test all aspects of student performance, as well as to measure staff and institutional performance through a wide range of data collection and quality control mechanisms. A diverse range of studies relating to issues of the performance of colleges as institutions appeared long before the "year zero" of incorporation in 1993. Many of these emanated from the *Further Education Staff College* at Blagdon and the *Further Education Unit* (FEU), (both of which were to be subsequently amalgamated as the *Further Education Development Agency* [FEDA]). FEU (1985) commissioned and published research which examined the feasibility of FE colleges using the services of external marketing consultants. Although this was a small scale study, involving just five colleges, there was within these institutions considerable support for the creation of a specific marketing job function in

colleges. A decade later such job roles would be common place and integral to the vital function of recruitment in a highly competitive market. The appearance of *The Responsive College* (Theodossin 1989) would underline that marketing had finally arrived as an integral rather than "add on" element of the work of colleges. This marketing would "sell" both the college and the vocational provision which made them distinctive from schools and which were often allegedly willfully neglected by the school teachers and careers staff advising GCSE students on their future roles (see Chapter 7). Taking inspiration from Peters and Waterman's (1982) American management classic *In Search of Excellence* Theodossin initially planned to identify excellent innovative colleges with the aim of promoting dissemination of their characteristics across the FE system. Ultimately finding it impossible to create an authoritative list of excellent/responsive colleges Theodossin settled on a presentation of evidence provided by his respondents in relation to a series of questions devised to elicit current thinking on the concept of responsiveness in relation to colleges. Theodossin (1989) identified a tension in the system between traditional educational values (which he characterised as *missionary* in nature), and those of industry/commerce (held by the *marketeers*). It was felt that a responsive college would put client needs before provider needs, and it was evident that this growing perception was generating some anxiety within colleges. There was a strong feeling that improved market research was going to be crucial to future success. Theodossin (1986) also found that formal systematic quality control data collection was generally absent and predicted that in an increasingly competitive environment "...performance indicators and output measures may come to be recognised as a hitherto



ignored source of ammunition." (p. 94). This was a prescient observation, but the resultant arsenal of information would produce bullets available to all.

In his foreword to *Coombe Lodge Report* Vol. 18 No. 3, a volume containing a series of papers and syndicate reports arising from a Further Education Staff College seminar, Melling (1985) explained that the event had been convened to "...explore ways of moderating or extending the methodology of audit studies". (p. 95), a phrase which implies an element of unease with the emerging mechanisms. *Measuring College Performance* (Birch and Latcham 1985a) employed an input/output model of education together with a systems theory based conception of a college in order to identify possible measures of effectiveness and efficiency for the teaching programme of a college. In the same volume Birch and Latcham (1985b) reviewed the performance indicators which had been deployed in *Colleges of Further Education: Guide to the Measurement of Resource Efficiency* (DoE 1983).

*Managing Colleges Efficiently* (DES/The Welsh Office 1987) identified a range of efficiency indicators. Minihane and Richards (1989) reviewed the application of industrial productivity measurement schemes in education asserting that "...despite the difficulties which may be encountered in defining and measuring inputs in education, it appears to be a legitimate proposition that education is no different from other forms of economic activity - its inputs are transformed to a final product." (p. 5). To illustrate this principle in relation to further education they proceed to somewhat selectively quote Jones (1985) as follows,

The college is seen as a processing plant which takes in students as the 'raw materials', passes them through teaching departments - the 'processing units' so that they come out as 'value added' products by virtue of their qualifications if they successfully survive the assessment process - 'quality control; otherwise they may be 'recycled', perhaps along a different production line. (p. 139)

This extract omits from the beginning of the original text "For the purpose of this approach the college is seen as...". The sentence used by Jones immediately following the end of the above quotation concedes that, "The production process in education is generally far more complex than that encountered in industry and commerce." (p. 139)

Gray (1992), in a paper which examined FE on the cusp of incorporation, was to complain that despite the assertion in *Managing Colleges Efficiently* (DES/The Welsh Office 1987) that efficiency should not be considered in isolation from effectiveness there was "...enormous emphasis on the efficiency component, with rather crude performance indicators beginning to drive the whole educational process." (p. 69) Thomson (1988), using the "market language" which was growing in currency at that time, examined approaches to the collection and analysis of feedback on "client [student and employer] satisfaction". 1988 also saw the publication by FEU of a series of introductory reports under the aegis of the DES's *Professional, Industrial and Commercial Updating* (PICKUP) initiative. One example summarised the development and evaluation of a quality assurance package at Manchester Polytechnic (FEU 1988a), whilst another (FEU 1988b) outlined the principles of Statistical Process Control which were popularised in post war Japan following the adoption there of the ideas of the celebrated American management consultant W. Edwards Deming.

A large scale postal survey was undertaken in 1990 (Sallis 1990) in order to find the extent to which quality initiatives were being undertaken in FE colleges. The response suggested that quality assurance was already receiving high priority in many colleges with, at that time, the BS 5750 quality assurance system which had been pioneered on a whole college basis by Sandwell College (see Collins, Cockburn, and MacRobert 1990) proving

attractive. 95 colleges (39 per cent of the respondents) were using BS 5750, though just half of these were doing so on a whole college basis. 35 per cent of respondents (86 colleges) were developing TQM approaches, whilst a third (79 colleges) were developing their own systems. Interestingly, a similar survey which was conducted in Northern Ireland in 1991-92 (Devlin 1992), and which gained a return rate of 92 per cent (22 out of the 24 institutions in Northern Ireland), showed that 82 per cent of respondents (18 colleges) had no system of quality assurance in place. 73 per cent of the colleges surveyed recognised quality as a "survival issue". The report concluded that quality systems awareness amongst staff was low. This, together with a significant range of pre-incorporation publications, suggests that the culture of industrially derived quality regulation systems was taking root in English FE colleges at a relatively early stage and certainly long before the influence of the FEFC was brought to bear.

Elliott (1996a) identified the *Further and Higher Education Act* (DES 1992) as having being responsible for five "...major system-changing effects..." as follows:

- It overturned the LEA, using the rationale that this was necessary in order to ensure that colleges had sufficient flexibility to respond effectively to market forces and satisfy the demands of their 'customers': students, their parents and their employers. However, in a very real sense, colleges were already responsive to their clients and succeeding in market terms by the governments own criteria (Audit Commission 1985; DES/WO 1987).
- ...FE colleges would now be moved in the same direction as opted-out schools and the newly privatised polytechnics...
- It applied an existing successful incorporation model to the FE sector, including the transfer of the funding function to a governmental quango...
- It considerably weakened a significant part of the schools sector by bringing school sixth form colleges into the FE sector under FEFC control...



- The 1992 FHE Act enabled government to control growth and drive down costs by introducing the notion of 'convergence' of funding between colleges... (pp. 16 -17)

Young and Spours (1998) have observed that the March 1997 Conservative Government White Paper *Learning to Compete* (DfEE 1997b) was the first ever on 14-19 education. Following a review of the Conservative legacy Young and Spours consider some issues arising from the Labour Party's (1996) *Aiming Higher* policy document. The curriculum is central to the effectiveness of both schools and colleges and, notwithstanding the observation above, there has been much discussion in recent years of this and related issues as they impact on post 14 learning outside higher education (see, for example, Hyland 1994a and 1994b; Beaumont 1995; NCVQ 1995b; Dearing 1996; Hodgson and Spours 1997; Young 1998). The emerging curriculum debate has taken place in the context of system and institutional factors grounded in the 1991 White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES/DE/WO 1991) and exemplified by the emergence of incorporated and competitive further education and sixth form colleges.

The adoption of the *National Targets for Education and Training* in 1991 (Cantor, Roberts and Pratley 1995) and their subsequent reinforcement through the White Paper *Competitiveness: Helping Business to Win* (DTI 1994) underlined the way in which macro-economic targets were beginning to impinge on the performance of the further education sector in more directly measurable ways than had ever been the case previously.

The election of a Labour Government which has placed education as central to its agenda has, together with the publication of the "Kennedy Report" *Learning Works* (FEFC 1997a), as well as that of John Tomlinson's (FEFC

1996) *Inclusive Learning* created the prospect of a radical vision for education in the new millennium. Fryer's (1997) *Learning for the Twenty-first Century* formed the basis for the DfEE (1998) consultation (Green) paper *The Learning Age: a renaissance for a new Britain* which, whilst occasioning some disappointment as a consequence of the technical status accorded to it, has not punctured the air of optimism which now generally pervades policy matters. Indeed, its endorsement of the need to develop a culture of lifelong learning for all, as well as of Baroness Kennedy's *Learning Works*, constitutes a *de facto* recognition and confirmation of the essential mission of further education. It is generally recognised, however, that whatever may be achieved will be based on improved effectiveness as opposed to substantive increases in funding levels.

The speech made on 18 October 1976 at Ruskin College by the then Prime Minister James Callaghan (Callaghan 1976) has taken on mythic proportions in education, a status which is not really borne out by the text. Callaghan did however capture a mood, and for those who have seen education as a creative and socially liberating process, it was perhaps a rather dark one. It is to that point that the demand for economic accountability and the quest for efficient (and effective) operation of schools, colleges and universities is often traced. BEC, at the time of Callaghan's intervention, was already two years old and was busy developing the courses which would be launched in the further education colleges just two years later.

In Spring 1995 a special "Quality For All" edition of the *NATFHE Journal* Vol. 20 No. 1 (NATFHE 1995) was devoted specifically to a critical review of what the editorial referred to as "...the maze of what has become a booming business of assessment and measurement." (p. 3). Social and political factors associated with the development of the drive to increased effectiveness in

Colleges, and specifically developments in management theory, have been succinctly discussed by Harris, Bennett, and Preedy (1997b). Concern has been expressed regarding the implications of an uncritical adoption of managerialist approaches, labour casualisation, inappropriate inspection and audit regimes, funding mechanisms based on crude performance indicators, and industrially derived quality ideologies (Elliott 1993, 1996a, 1996b, 1998; Holmes 1993; Elliott and Hall 1994; Reeves 1995; Avis 1996a and 1998; Ainley and Bailey 1997; Randle and Brady 1997). The perceived existence of these negative factors and the potential which related staff and student demoralisation may hold for college effectiveness require serious and urgent investigation.

Some college staff have complained loudly, on occasion through the education press, (see for example *Total Quality Collapse* Green 1994), about the "new business culture". Hodkinson and Hodkinson (1995) see the "new paradigm" of quality management as based on three theoretical assumptions which are taken as "self-evident truths". The first is the rational choice theory which suggests that human behaviour can be explained as the result of the rational decisions of individuals. This is seen "...as fundamental to a market model of VET..." (p. 211). The second is a belief in the market theories of Adam Smith which were excavated and popularised by Thatcherism. Thirdly, there has been a partial assimilation of the philosophy of Total Quality Management, incorporating the impulse to measure but, it is argued, excluding the element of whole workforce involvement which was fundamental to the influential Japanese model on which it is based.

Halliday (1996b) has addressed the question of what values might inform and be transmitted by further education (see also McGinty and Fish 1993).



Halliday identifies a tension between the value laden mission of FE colleges and "...the perception that FE is a value-neutral commercial response to a presumed market in education." (p. 67) Arguing that vocational practices are as value laden as, say, feminist pedagogy, Halliday suggests that vocational education should intrinsically incorporate values education. Elsewhere Halliday (1998) has observed that,

While there has been much talk of quality in FE the emphasis has been on quality of procedures rather than quality in overall provision which would provide a focus for debate about what an FE ought to do. It is on this issue of quality that value concerns and the flight to avoid value judgments becomes most apparent. (p. 6)

The introduction to a recent book aimed at lecturers moving into management roles in further education (Harper 1997) suggests that being a manager in a college is essentially the same as being a manager in other organisations. Certainly management may be regarded as a generic skill rather than as a specific occupation, and further education colleges are invariably substantial organisations with large budgets, significant numbers of staff, costly physical infrastructures, and very challenging missions to accomplish. They are organisations for learning as well as being learning organisations. Jones (1994) has argued that hierarchical class based attitudes have prevented most British organisations from changing their cultures to the more successful and fundamentally more democratic ones which are evident in many competitor economies. According to Jones these entrenched industrial attitudes are also prevalent in the education sector, it is suggested that

...for all the rhetoric over recent years concerning quality, empowerment, TQM, customer care etc., most British organisations in education and industry show a fundamental misunderstanding of what is required for effective action, and continue in hierarchical working, teaching and learning practices. (p. 39)

There is now a huge management literature devoted specifically to this topic of leadership in organisations [for a brief introduction to leadership issues in

relation to Total Quality Management and a number of concise case studies of leadership in an industrial context see DTI (1991)]. Crawford (1997), suggests that,

All teams call for effective leading and following at every level. Thus leading is not a one-dimensional activity but a process in which more than one person is engaged, whether this is within a whole organisation or specific team setting. Proficient leading and team working is, therefore, central to effective performance within schools and colleges. (p. 1)

Crawford, Kydd and Riches (1997) provides a collection of fourteen papers which consider various aspects of leadership and teamwork in relation to educational institutions. This publication provides a sound overview for those wishing to become conversant with the underpinning principles and discourse of leadership scholarship in relation to educational settings. It also underlines the congruence between business leadership and that in schools/colleges. Marsh (1992) features a concise discussion of leadership theory directly in the context of the management of further and higher education. The actual practice of leadership in colleges since incorporation, however, has been the subject of fierce criticism in the educational press.

Betts (1994) has attacked the "diminishing democracy" of college government as revealed in the declining extent of staff representation on governing bodies with nearly 10 per cent of governing bodies having voted to completely exclude staff representatives. NATFHE research into the gender and ethnic balance of FE governors revealed 82 per cent male/18 per cent female, whilst 97 per cent were white with 1 per cent Afro-Caribbean and 2 per cent Asian. There is a very real sense in which this kind of under-representation constitutes both an effectiveness and democratic issue in the governance and management of publicly funded organisations.

Rick Dearing (1994) has attempted to identify factors in organisational change and planning in further education colleges, both at the time of incorporation (the survey stage of his study was conducted in 1992) and beyond. Dearing's study highlighted four sets of factors as affecting strategic planning. "Functional factors" were those concerned primarily with the introduction and development of effective business (especially financial) systems. "Environmental factors" were those arising from the market economy principles which were emanating from central government, senior managers were concerned regarding possible reductions in funding and consequent difficulties in maintaining quality and serving disadvantaged client groups. There was also a sense that the public service ethic was still dominant amongst the majority of staff and that this gave rise to what Dearing called "values, culture and planning" factors. There was a perceived resistance to change. There was also a major concern with career issues and questions of job security - these Dearing termed "personnel/individual" factors. Dearing proceeded to briefly relate these factors to the literature concerning aspects of organisational change and dynamics.

The post-incorporation funding methodology ensured that student retention became a major concern for college management. The Audit Commission/Ofsted (1993) report *Unfinished Business* highlighted the existence of a "retention problem" and fueled thinking on how this might be tackled. Many colleges have examined their internal mechanisms in relation to this phenomena. Case study research (Martinez 1995 and 1996) has found empirical support for some of the nostrums of management of change theory,

Ownership by and support from senior managers is important. Action in conditions of partial and incomplete information is preferable to an endless search for perfect information. All the case study strategies



were driven by people who adopted what can be described as change agent roles...the successful strategies all embody elements of college transformation... (Martinez 1996 p. 3).

More recent FEDA publications relating to the retention issue are Barwauh, Green and Lawson (1997), Martinez (1997), and Martinez, Houghton and Krupska (1998). The latter focuses specifically on the question of professional development for college staff in relation to the retention strategies issue.

Amongst the most cited of modern management texts are the Peters and Waterman classic *In Search of Excellence* (1982) and the Peters follow-up *Thriving on Chaos* (1989). These and similar works have been immensely influential in stimulating management thinking in a wide range of industries seeking to adapt to the conditions of post-Fordist economies. The essential message of these texts is the need for organisations to focus on establishing an appropriate culture. *Changing the Culture of a College* (Gorringe and Toogood 1994) provides eight accounts of change in different colleges, each written by a nationally prominent principal/director/chief executive. This collection is useful in drawing together diverse views which are grounded in the management of change within colleges. Ralph (1995), through an action learning study, provides a relatively detailed and theoretically sophisticated account of innovation and change processes as experienced by change agents in a single college. This contribution suggests, significantly in the context of a general FE climate which is influenced by classical industrial quality regimes, that "The learning organisation develops out of the praxis and growth of its members and its promotion does not require a 'right first time' culture." (p. 535). Levacic and Glatter (1997) is an edited collection of papers

focusing on change management issues in further education in England, Scotland and Wales. The first of five studies featured focuses on the development of strategic management in three colleges; the second considers strategic responses to pressures of competition and cost-cutting; the third discusses the learning strategies adopted by three colleges; the fourth paper considers the subjective views of change held by staff at different levels of the organisational structure in five colleges; the final paper, through nine brief case studies, examines co-operative partnerships between schools, colleges and universities. The collection as a whole outlines a series of responses to the post-incorporation climate, including the impulse to create more learner-centred courses, more innovative marketing, improved administration and student support, and up-graded physical environments. Tensions arising from change are not ignored and the collection as a whole concisely traverses the wide territory which is demanded by a study of the management of change in further education.

Betts (1995 and 1996) has argued for appraisal schemes to be extended to the growing number of part-time staff (who are often not incorporated in college schemes) and linked directly to professional development. Betts (1996) identifies three key national policy changes as impacting on college appraisal and staff development schemes. These were the introduction through the 1991 national salary agreement for FE of "...a framework for local negotiations on staff development, training and appraisal." (p. 99); the establishment through the *Further and Higher Education Act* of 1992 of the FE Corporations and the Further Education Funding Council; and, also through the 1992 Act, the ending of the Grant for Educational Support and



Training (GEST) funding scheme. Betts (1996), following an analysis of FEFC inspection reports and a review of appraisal schemes in seven colleges, argues that the consequence of these changes is that staff development in FE is not receiving high priority and that it is also suffering from short-termism. Ollin (1996) has pointed to the dangers of current staff development practices in FE leading to the deskilling of lecturers as a consequence of college managements failing to learn lessons from approaches to investment in human resource development in the industrial sector.

It is within the context outlined above, which can fairly be described as one in which educational and academic values have been at least sublimated and possibly displaced by a shallow managerialist ideology, that the following sentiment from Crombie White, Pring, and Brockington (1995) seems highly appropriate

...we need constantly to remind ourselves of the essentially moral and social purpose - not only of education but also of training. Jerome Bruner's three questions 'What makes people human?'. 'how did they become so?', 'How might they be more so?' have sadly become instead 'What makes people wealthy?', 'How do they become so?' and 'How might they be more so?' (p. 61)

During the early years following incorporation effectiveness and quality concerns within the newly independent FE institutions focused strongly on the recently established structures and procedures associated with governance and management. It is evident that FEFC inspections will now place greater emphasis on the curriculum, thereby orientating more towards the core concern with the processes of teaching and learning. It can also be anticipated that increased attention will be paid to issues of equity and entitlement. It seems likely, however, that whatever challenges and changes may follow in the wake of *Learning Works* ['The Kennedy Report'] (FEFC



1997) will have to be met through improved college effectiveness rather than by increased levels of funding.

Hargreaves (1994) has suggested that for teachers and their work the curriculum is a major factor in the analysis of professional change. The nature of the curricula which are deployed with colleges must necessarily have a fundamental impact on the quality of learning experienced by students.

Smithers and Robinson (1993) have observed that,

The 'competence-based' approach has important implications for colleges. It reflects a belief that demonstrable 'competence' is the whole aim, so that how the competence is acquired is strictly speaking irrelevant. It requires assessment to be available on demand. It shifts the focus from curriculum and education to assessment and qualification. It has been suggested that such an approach, taken to an extreme, threatens colleges with becoming the education equivalent of driving test centres! (p.46)

In 1987 the Further Education Unit published its *Quality in NAFE* (FEU 1987) report on issues of quality in respect of Work Related Non-Advanced Further Education curricula (WRNAFE) in response to a contract which had been placed with it by the Manpower Services Commission (MSC). FEU were unequivocal in arguing that the key issue in quality was the curriculum, and that approaches to improving quality would therefore need to be curriculum-led. Some questions of quality and effectiveness in relation to the curriculum must be fundamental rather than instrumental. In addition to an evaluation of raw content and modes of delivery there is a need to philosophically interrogate the nature of dominant curricula forms which reflect the hegemony of empiricism in vocational education (Halliday 1996a).

When Jessup (1991), from his then position as Director of Research for The National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), opened his account of the philosophy behind the National Vocational qualifications (NVQs) with the assertion that,

The measure of success for any education and training system should be what people actually learn from it, and how effectively. Just common sense you might think, yet this is a comparatively new idea...  
(p. 3)

he betrayed the centrality of measurement and effectiveness as central concepts in the new forms of curricula of which the BEC/BTEC National Diploma was a key example. The notion that these programmes offered effective learning, as an intrinsic consequence of their design, is one which cannot be ignored in a consideration of their educational value and some views on this will be presented in Chapter 7. A number of critiques have strongly suggested fundamental problems, most notably perhaps those from Hyland (1993; 1994a; 1994b) and Smithers (1993 and 1997). Bloomer (1997) has, through a substantial study of the experience of the curriculum by students and teachers, attacked the processes of curriculum reform in post-16 education. Edwards, Taylor Fitz-Gibbon, Hardman, Haywood, and Meagher (1997) have examined the issue of 'parity of esteem' between vocational and academic curricula, pointing to an educationally damaging divide between the two.

FEU (1986) expressed concerns regarding the implications for quality of the separation of assessment from delivery in the competence based NVQ model. Nearly a decade later the "Capey Report" on GNVQs (NCVQ 1995b) recommended that NCVQ should both review the language within the GNVQ and move from element based towards unit based assessment having found that the "...GNVQ assessment and recording requirements were far too detailed and counter productive in terms of teaching and learning." (p. 23) One perceived effect of the forms of pedagogical practice which derive from the new curricula is the deskilling of the teaching process.

The new style of student centred curriculum introduced by BEC/BTEC was a major impetus in transforming the role of the FE lecturer from something approaching that of an instructor to one which is now frequently referred to as that of a facilitator (or, less frequently, learning consultant). Many have found this transition difficult. Cunningham (1997) has addressed the issue of problems experienced and caused by ineffective teachers in post-compulsory education. The highly competitive and monitored environment of further education having created a context which means that scrutiny of individual performance has been intensified. Charters have created a situation where it is the norm for poor performance to be reported. Monitoring of student retention can often lead directly to problem tutors. The 1996-97 FEFC Annual Report (FEFC 1997b) indicated that strengths outweighed weaknesses in 61 per cent of those classes observed. Between 1993 and 1997 there was an average annual 8 per cent of sessions observed which had weaknesses which outweighed strengths. The majority of those classes observed by inspectors then were deemed to be "...well planned and effective" (p. 46). The Chief Inspector's Report went on to suggest that,

Good relationships between students and their teachers result in purposeful work. In the better lessons, there is an appropriate balance of talk by teachers, and activities which involve students in practical work. These lessons provide opportunities for students to reinforce and demonstrate what they have learned while providing teachers with an opportunity to pay attention to students' individual needs. Effective teaching also builds on students previous knowledge and experience, and provides them with frequent opportunities to link what they have learned to the world of work. There remain too many teachers, however, whose lessons are poorly managed and who depend too much on presenting material without checking whether their students are learning. Inspectors frequently note that their lessons fail to sustain students' interest and attention. Other teachers have been slow to adapt their teaching methods to developments in the curriculum and students' increasingly varied backgrounds... (p. 46)

Cunningham suggests that remedies for the problems facing failing teachers might include the provision of support through peer observation and



mentorship together with the encouragement of reflective practice (through the maintenance of a diary or critical incident analysis).

Ashcroft and Foreman-Peck (1996) have perceptively observed that,  
The process of framing professional and pedagogic development in terms of performance indicators and quality standards may be necessary to satisfy the need for accountability to outside institutions. The ability to describe action in these terms is a management skill, they [models of quality] may oversimplify reality, and an uncritical adherence can distort other aspects of quality. Reflective practitioners do not see themselves as solely accountable to those with power, but also to those, including themselves, who have an interest in the educational process but limited opportunities to influence its overall direction (p. 24)

It is important that lecturers in FE are able to conceptualise themselves as professionals. Elliott (1998) has persuasively made the connection between the working practices of lecturers and their sense of the value and worth of what they do. This underlines the necessity of recognising the centrality of processes of teaching and learning in questions of college effectiveness, and the crucial nature of the task of assuring that these are given a higher profile than they have hitherto enjoyed in the debates surrounding quality in the sector. The BEC/BTEC curriculum has been the key factor in transforming the working practices of thousands of FE lecturers over the past twenty years, but this has not been widely recognised. As formal conditions of employment have changed in a context of industrial struggle, the day to day processes of teaching and learning have been altered by stealth and within a disarming rhetoric of educational progressivism. The chapter which follows will examine the inception, growth, and development of the change agent in question, that is the Business, later Business and Technology, Education Council.

## Summary

The above chapter was intended to elaborate the wider theoretical background to this study and therefore began with an outline of some key ideas which have been influential within the sociology of education over the past twenty years. Particular reference was made to ideology and hegemony given the significance of these concepts in relation to knowledge and the curriculum. Debates within the sociology of education surrounding the reproduction thesis and the relative autonomy theory were then discussed. This theoretical contextualisation was followed by a study of the human and organisational context within which the BEC/BTEC curriculum was operationalised. This progressed from a general consideration of the changing role of teachers to a fuller overview of change within the further education sector in England. This account incorporated a specific discussion of the ways in which the work of FE lecturers has been transformed by new working and curricula practices of which the BEC/BTEC National Diploma has been a major instance. The chapter which follows will describe the formation of BEC, and its subsequent development as BTEC, as the body which was instrumental in developing and imposing this programme.

## **Chapter Five**

### **THE INCEPTION AND DEVELOPMENT OF BEC/BTEC**

#### **Introduction and Background**

The relationship between a curriculum and the associated institutions, be they schools/colleges, departments of state, or awarding bodies, is a complex one. The increasing interest in the area of curriculum history points to a recognition of the significance of the curriculum within the context of Educational Studies. Goodson (1994), in a chapter which was co-authored by Dowbiggin, states that curriculum history is important because

...it enables us to scrutinize a fundamental part of schooling that historians have tended to ignore; the internal processes or 'black box' of the school. Curriculum history seeks to explain how school subjects, tracks and courses of study have constituted a mechanism to designate and differentiate students. It also offers a way to analyse the complex relations between school and society because it shows how schools both reflect and refract society's definitions of culturally valuable knowledge in ways which defy simplistic models of reproduction theory. Our contention is that curriculum history...enables us to examine the roles that professions - like education - play in the social construction of knowledge. (pp. 40-41)

Goodson argues that the social history of subjects in the British secondary school system shows a process in which school teachers have been encouraged to define knowledge in particular ways in return for status and resources. The defining power which Goodson identifies is essentially that of the universities, whose grip on the school curriculum has, primarily, been exercised via the GCE Advanced Level and GCSE Examination Boards. There are clear parallels between the relationship of schools and universities mediated by GCSE and GCE A Level examination boards, and technical/further education colleges and industry where vocational education examining/awarding bodies have acted as the primary mediators. It must be acknowledged, however, that the majority of employers have generally tended to be more far flexible than most universities in terms of their approach towards formal qualifications as a precondition of entry.



Notwithstanding this, within certain vocational areas, the various awarding bodies have exercised considerable influence. The Royal Society of Arts (RSA), the City and Guilds of London Institute (CGLI) and the Business and Technology Education Council (BTEC) (now an "operating division" of Edexcel) are the prime examples of such bodies (Macfarlane 1993).

In chapters 6 and 7 an attempt will be made to explore issues of how the BTEC curriculum in the field of Business Studies developed, how it was implemented, and what impressions it made on employers, lecturers, students and others. The philosophy, design, structure and content of the BTEC National Award in Business and Finance will be charted in order to construct an account of a "living curriculum" in transition and also to examine how the curriculum was contested, resisted, "policed" and enforced. One element within this account will necessarily be the formation and role of the Business and Technology Education Council "itself", that is the Council as a bureaucratic (in the Weberian sense) institution which has necessarily acted as an instrument of Government policy, either directly through ministerial influence, or indirectly (as a part of, in Althusserian terms, the Educational Ideological State Apparatus). In recognition of this, and as a prelude to consideration of the curriculum *per se*, the genesis of and some aspects of the development of BEC/BTEC will be briefly outlined and discussed. This, following a description of BTEC's current status, will take the form of a chronological narrative with some attendant interpretation. This will be attempted with recognition of the inadequacies of such accounts as histories of everyday experience, and is intended to serve primarily as a contextual backdrop to the analysis which is to follow in subsequent chapters. It should be noted that a particular problem in considering the relatively recent history of British institutions is the fact that public records are unavailable until the elapse of 30 years.

BTEC has now firmly established itself as the major awarding body in the field of vocational education and training (VET) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. BTEC's qualifications are offered within the national framework which was laid down by the former National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), now the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), and they receive wide *official* recognition from employers and from higher education institutions. The subject fields covered include agriculture, art and design, caring (health and social care), construction (built environment), distribution, engineering, hotel and catering (hospitality), information technology, leisure and tourism, management, manufacturing, the performing arts, and science. The largest single area is that of business related courses. As at 1 October 1996 BTEC had 326,658 current student registrations (Edexcel 1997); two years earlier it had had an archive of 3,844,000 student records (including those derived from its predecessor bodies), and BTEC programmes had been available at more than 1,000 colleges, schools, and universities in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (BTEC 1994a). [For an indication of student registration figures for the BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance since 1986 see *Appendix D*].

On 1 October 1993 BTEC was officially invested with a new constitution which effected its transfer in status from being a Non-Departmental Public Body (albeit a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity) whose Chairman and members were appointed by the Secretary of State for Education, to being a (technically) independent body operating within the private sector. Further and Higher Education Minister Tim Boswell welcomed BTEC's transition stating that,

This move recognises BTEC's major achievement in establishing itself over the last ten years as a major provider of high quality vocational qualifications to more and more young people and adults. BTEC has also succeeded in opening up a vocational route to higher education...



Vocational qualifications are playing an increasingly important role in our education and training system as Britain seeks to compete effectively in a demanding world market...BTEC has thrown its weight behind the new Vocational A levels - Advanced General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) - and the underpinning Intermediate GNVQs and has also reaffirmed its commitment to offering job-specific National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) alongside the more general GNVQs...I attach very great importance to achieving our aims for GNVQs - 1,500 schools and colleges offering GNVQs in at least two subjects, and one in four 16 year-olds starting GNVQ courses by 1996. And effective introduction of NVQs is the key to achieving the National Education and Training Targets...BTEC has a major role to play in the attainment of these aims and I wish it the very best success for the future. (BTEC 1994a p. 3)

The pro-GNVQ rhetoric and the reassurances addressed to BTEC betray a number of tensions which had arisen in the role of BTEC *vis-à-vis* NCVQ and in the relationship between BTEC's vision of the 16-19 vocational curriculum and that which had become manifest in the GNVQ model which NCVQ had promulgated. This issue will be returned to below.

On 24 April 1996 BTEC merged with London Examinations (The University of London Examinations and Assessment Council) to form Edexcel Foundation, commonly known as Edexcel. Christina Townsend, the Chief Executive of BTEC since February 1994 (when she had succeeded John Sellars following his stewardship of near twenty years), became Chief Executive of Edexcel, stating that,

Anticipating the needs arising from the Dearing Report, and employment trends, Edexcel Foundation will develop innovative qualifications and assessment methods to support the changing requirements for knowledge and skills in the workplace of the future. Simplifying solutions and pioneering new combinations of academic, applied and vocational qualifications will be high priorities.

(Townsend 1996 p. 1)



The new organisation was formed in anticipation of being placed at a strategic advantage in the context of a potential convergence between academic and vocational programmes. Whilst maintaining that BTEC and London Examinations would continue to exist as separate “operating divisions” of Edexcel it was made clear that this arrangement would be for “the time being” and that “...the organisation is actively working to bring the two divisions together...” (Edexcel 1996 p. 3). To date there is no sign that this total convergence is imminent.

The Business and Technology Education Council was founded (as the Business and *Technician* Education Council) on 1 January 1983; the new body was a logical and seemingly inevitable merger of the earlier Business Education Council (BEC) and the Technician Education Council (TEC), and it officially took over from those bodies on 1 October 1993. TEC had been established in 1973, and BEC had been formally set up by the Secretary of State for Education and Science (Mrs. Margaret Thatcher) on 21 May 1974. Both bodies had been established in response to the *Report of the Committee on Technician Courses and Examinations* (DES 1969) (generally known as the *Haslegrave Report*), which the Secretary of State for Education and Science had invited the National Advisory Council on Education for Industry and Commerce (NACEIC) to prepare. Dr. H. L. Haslegrave, a former Vice-Chancellor of Loughborough University, had been commissioned by the Government to conduct a national review of technician level courses in the technical and business sectors. The Report expressed dissatisfaction regarding the then existing provision, condemning it as “...unsuitable in a

number of important respects as an instrument for meeting not only existing needs...but needs likely to arise in the coming years." (p. 14) (quoted in BTEC 1987).

The vocational education terrain which Haslegrave had surveyed was a complex one resting on two main elements. The older bed-rock consisted of National Certificate and Diploma schemes which had been established as early as 1921 (BTEC 1987). These led to the award of "Ordinary" and "Higher Certificate/Diplomas" (ONCs/Ds and HNCs/Ds) and each course was administered by a "Joint Committee" comprising representatives of industry and education. These committees were the Joint Committee for National Awards in Business Studies and Public Administration, the Joint Committee for National Certificates in Distribution, and the National Committee for Certificates in Office Studies (Morris 1977). The impact of these courses on the national psyche can be testified by the fact that the HNC/D lives on today, and that many employers and some educationalists still use the terms ONC/Ds when referring to Advanced GNVQs even though these courses and associated nomenclature officially disappeared from the scene in 1979. In addition to the ONC/D and HNC/D systems there existed a range of "G" (General) and "T" (Technician) courses which had been established in response to the White Paper *Better Opportunities in Technical Education* (DES 1961). These courses were examined by the City and Guilds of London Institute together with six Regional Examining Boards (REBs). The plethora of awards and committees was a matter of concern for Haslegrave who saw a need for some form of overall co-ordination which would serve to rationalise the situation. It was partially in order to achieve this that Haslegrave recommended the establishment of BEC and TEC so that

...a start should be made to drawing together under one body for each of the two main sectors, technical and business, responsibility for planning, co-ordinating and administering technician and technician-

level courses, examinations and educational qualifications of a national character" (p. 15 ) (BTEC 1987)

As the above statement makes clear, it was intended from the start that BEC and TEC should ultimately merge. Indeed, the Haslegrave Report recommended that BEC and TEC (DES 1969 para. 189) should share the same administrative organisation and, furthermore, that this should be provided by the existing establishment of the City and Guilds of London Institute. This would have seriously compromised the independence of the new bodies and W. F. Crick, the CNAA's representative on the Committee, was moved to insist on the inclusion of a "note of dissent" in the published report which stated his "grave objections" to this recommendation (ibid. p. 87-88). When BEC and TEC came into being they were independent not only from CGLI but also from each other though the BEC/TEC Consultative Working Party was constituted in 1976 as a joint committee of the two councils (BEC Annual Report 1976-1977). BEC and TEC had some significant differences. Whilst TEC was restricted to technician level courses (covering "National" and "Higher National" levels), BEC covered lower levels of education by introducing the "General" Certificates and Diplomas which were operated, in effect, on an open-entry basis were intended to be broadly equivalent to GCE Ordinary/GCSE level. The respective curriculum structures were also markedly different. TEC courses were based on "essential" and "optional" *units* at various levels. BEC adopted a model of "core" and "optional" *modules* which were infused by three "themes" (people, money, and communication). A further difference between TEC and BEC was the latter's strong emphasis on integration of the curriculum. This was a major philosophical belief of the BEC curriculum planners (Sellars 1977) and was given practical expression by a requirement that students should under-take "Cross-Modular Assignments" (CMAs).



The Haslegrave Report (DES 1969), besides calling for the establishment of BEC and TEC and effectively creating the founding ethos of those organisations, is of interest in the context of this study in that it encapsulates something of British thinking about vocational education in the late 1960s. *The Committee on Technician Courses and Examinations*, to use the proper title, consisted of H. L. Haslegrave as Chair and thirteen other members. Five of these were Principals or Vice-Principals drawn from technical colleges (all of which were then called *technical* colleges), another was M. Hutton, Rector of Sunderland Polytechnic. There was also a LEA Chief Education Officer and a CNAA representative. Significantly, no universities were represented amongst the eight members drawn from the education sector. Two members were drawn from Industrial Training Boards, two from trade unions, and only one directly from industry. The Committee spent some time deliberating on the meaning of the term “technician”.

Haslegrave’s working definition of technician, adopted from an earlier Government report, was,

Technicians and other technical support staff occupy a position between that of the qualified scientist, engineer or technologist on the one hand, and the skilled foreman or craftsman or operative on the other. Their education and specialised skills enable them to exercise technical judgement. By this is meant an understanding, by reference to general principles, of the reasons for and the purposes of their work, rather than a reliance solely on established practices or accumulated skills. (ibid. p. 3)

Mindful that “technician” might be too technical a term for those in commerce and business the committee added, that a person working at technician level in those sectors would be,

One who has acquired detailed knowledge and skills in one specialist field, or knowledge or skill to a lesser degree in more than one specialist field; is required to exercise judgement, in the sense of both diagnosis and appraisal, and initiative in his work; is frequently called upon to supervise the work of others; and has an appreciation of the environment beyond the immediate limits of his duties. (ibid. p. 4)

The committee speculated that the increasing use of computers across the broad business field might lead to more generalised use of the descriptor “technician” but also made it clear that they were happy for other terms to be used or to emerge. They did, however, argue that the status of technicians (and by implication their non-technical counterparts), was a critical concern. Quoting a Ministers speech from 1966 they argued that the technician “...is neither a superior tradesman nor a depressed technologist...” (ibid. p. 8) and that technicians must be accorded a distinct status and ethos. The Committee stressed that this was something which they had kept in the foreground of their thinking and they hoped that their recommendations would be helpful to those “...concerned to see that he [sic] [the technician or equivalent] is given his rightful place in our modern society.” (ibid. p. 8). It was suggested that this could be best achieved through distinct courses designed specifically for this group. In practice, outside the conservative and relatively technical precinct of accounting, technician would not become a favoured term for those working in business and the occupational category of technician would not acquire the status which Haslegrave had hoped it would. Moreover, the concern to locate the target of these courses in a specific and, if special, still relatively fixed and essentially class based part of the occupational hierarchy betrayed an ideological subtext which would bedevil vocational education throughout the rest of the century.

Braverman's (1974) classic *Labor and Monopoly Capital* stimulated a rich debate about the nature of work, the changes in the mode of production brought about by technological advances, and the consequences of these for the structures of workforces and of social classes. Braverman's central thesis, that work in the Twentieth Century was effectively being degraded by modern “scientific management” techniques and the associated technologies, is not central to the argument being made here but his problematisation of the



work/class nexus is highly pertinent. More recently Ainley (1993) has provided a useful discussion of the changing relationship between class and skill. What is crucial in this context, however, is the recognition that traditional categories of employment and of social class were radically fragmented by a wide range of economic and social factors in such a way that to identify, as Haslegrave did, a seemingly aspirational social category which was "...neither a superior tradesman nor a depressed technologist..." (DES 1969) was indicative of some deeply anachronistic thinking. The post-industrial world of late capitalism is infinitely more complex than such a formulation allows, not only in terms of the sophistication of its production and selling techniques, the personalised communication and information technologies, the twenty-four hour global finance markets, but also with regard to the social categories, relationships and images which it generates. Sinclair's (1997) luminous musings on the commercial life of 90s London, if a little florid, suggested something of this mix of instability and possibility where both social class and capital are less visible,

Into the shopping arcade of Liverpool Street - chocolates, cheese, perfume, knickers - come the trains of women who would once have been called "typists", and are now something more complicated: smilers, laptop princesses. Men who would have waited years for a shared telephone, effortlessly sink merchant banks. Number-crunchers treat the City like a betting shop. The future is optional. Money is a cosmetic. Male and female are professionally attractive, available. There's no landscape outside the train window. It's too dark for that. they start early and drink late. You have to be able to out-breakfast the opposition. Night has been abolished. (p. 91)

What is hinted at by Lyotard (1984) is not so much that those metaphorically oiling the equally metaphorical wheels will be (or are) technicians produced by "technical colleges" (this being a fast disappearing institutional title), but rather that

...the institutions of higher learning are called upon to create skills and no longer ideals...The transmission of knowledge is no longer designed to train an elite capable of guiding the nation towards its emancipation, but to supply the system with players capably of



acceptably fulfilling their roles at the pragmatic posts required by the institutions. (p. 48)

This suggests a kind of technician, but a new kind of technician for which the title is finally obsolete. Furthermore, this employee, reflecting new social aspirations, is shaped and produced at a later stage of educational development than that for which BEC/BTEC was primarily created. Like all social institutions, educational organisations inevitably tend to reflect more of past thinking than they possibly can of those ideas which, whilst nascent in the present, can only become manifest in the future.

## **BEC**

When BEC held its first meeting in June 1974 the appointed Chairman was J. M. Bruce Lockhart, a former career diplomat who was then an academic at the City University London Business School. The Council's first publication *A Note of Intent*, when published in September (BEC 1974), announced that 38 years old John Sellars, then Head of the Department of Computer Science at Lanchester Polytechnic in Coventry, would be appointed Chief Officer with effect from 1 November 1974. On taking up his post John Sellars was the Council's only employee and he was to preside over massive growth before his retirement at the end of January 1994. He was also to create and realise a vision of the vocational curriculum which sought to be both relevant to business and, within the ideologically limited terms suggested in Chapter 4, to educate the whole person. [Interviews undertaken with John Sellars on 25 January 1994 and 19 April 1996 have informed aspects of this study]. If the foundations of BEC had been, in some respects, less than forward thinking the curriculum which within a few short years was launched in the colleges would be arguably ahead of its time.

There were twenty-four inaugural members of the Business Education Council. Five of these were drawn from industry, one from a trade union, seven from local government, two from professional bodies, one from a Research Council, four from colleges of further education, two from polytechnics and one from a university. The remit of the Council, as stated in the *Note of Intent* (BEC 1974) was

...to plan, administer and keep under review the development of a unified national pattern of course in the field of business studies at levels below that of first degree (for example those of the present ONC/OND, HNC/HND awards); and to this end to devise or approve suitable courses, establish and assess standards of performance, and award certificates and diplomas as appropriate. (p. 1)

In the same document the Council envisaged its task as "...rationalisation and unification, plus a degree of innovation..." (p. 1) and announced its intention to enquire into the existing courses and qualifications, to develop appropriate policies, and to co-operate closely with TEC. A preliminary statement of policy would be produced "...as soon as we can..." and this would be circulated for comment. The resultant *Consultative Document* (BEC 1975) appeared in June of the following year.

The *Consultative Document* of 1975 broadly set out BEC's view of its role and attempted to outline the current climate for VET, identifying a lack of commitment from employers as a problem (ibid. p. 2). Sellars underlined the extent of this problem when he stated that,

When Haslegrave started his work, I understand that a possible idea in his, and the Government's mind, was to set up just one "Education Council". As Haslegrave went on it became apparent that employers would not turn employees loose on capital equipment unless they were further educated or trained, because they would either get injured or they would damage the equipment. So, on the technician side there was no question that employers supported training. On the business side though it was too often a case of "welcome, sit next to him, or her, and you'll find out how we do it". Sometimes one employer would have different policies for technician and for business/administration staff. It was decided that there should be two councils because two different challenges existed. (interview, 25 January 1994)



The Consultative Document (BEC 1975) set out a proposed programme for the development of BEC (to September 1976), and also identified BEC's proposed course philosophy, a framework for course design, and the types of award which might be offered. The Council's *First Policy Statement* (BEC 1976) indicated that more than 300 written submissions had been made in response to the Consultative Document and that "As a result Council has modified some of its original proposals." (p. ii). A comparison of the two documents, however, reveals little in the way of substantive change, and this despite the fact that the consultation exercise had generated a good deal of concern in some quarters. The following statements indicate a range of individual responses to BEC's Consultative Document which were recorded in an unpublished report on a one day regional conference for further education staff held on 15 October 1975 at the Huddersfield Polytechnic School of Education (Twigg 1975):

It was felt that BEC should go back to the drawing board and consider philosophy before determining structure. (p. 4)

...there was a massive job of staff development involved if the job were to be done properly. (p. 6)

The group considered appendix 4 [Programme Committees - Fields of Activity] remarkable for its ambiguity. The functional classification was rejected and it was felt that it would be much better to have a hierarchical structure of committees which was concerned at each of the three levels with identifying a common core which could be applicable to a student in whatever sphere of activity...Artificial divisions would hinder rather than help business education. (There was general agreement from the floor on this comment). (p. 1)

...there was a need for BEC to go back to first principles... (p. 2)

It was generally agreed that there was a need for BEC to come back with a second Consultative Document (not a Policy Document), because at present there were still too many fundamental questions unanswered. Members questioned the need for speed in producing a policy document; they had no evidence of an urgent need to introduce a revised system, and they felt that it would be better to take a little



longer than currently envisaged by BEC, in order to produce a better scheme. (p. 2)

Just five months after the above meeting the finalised *First Policy Statement* arrived in the colleges, to be followed by the *Initial Guidelines on the Implementation of Policy* (BEC 1977a) in May of the following year. The threat of impending change without adequate consultation set off a flurry of concerned journal papers expressing concern (Ryan 1977a and 1977b; Morris 1977; Hannagan 1978) That the impact of these changes was continuing to reverberate within colleges might be suggested by the following extract from correspondence dated 30 June 1977 and addressed to John Sellars at BEC from a Head of Business Studies at a large Technical College (HTC BEC/BTEC Archive 1975 -1995),

[with reference to OND students] At sixteen years of age they and their parents have to choose a course and the procedures for helping their choice will start in the Autumn. The Diploma in the end is used for many things, for entrance to universities, for entrance to the foundation course in accounting, for evidence of a good general business education often coupled in the case of girls with secretarial skills...How can school leavers be advised unless we have an early definite pronouncement from BEC that the Diploma arrived at by the full-time route will be as acceptable as the present OND which ranks with 'A' Level for university entrance? Parents and Teachers will want to know the acceptability of the BEC award for Higher Education or professional advancement...will it be possible to commence BEC courses on a part-time basis whilst continuing with OND under rules 124 on a Full-time basis?

The BEC National Awards Module Specifications, replacing the "OND under rules 124" were published in the Autumn of 1977 (BEC 1977b). BEC had developed from a policy idea to a curriculum in a little over forty months and further education business studies departments were on the eve of a curriculum revolution which followed more than forty years of what, it would transpire, had been relative calm and stability. The charge of inadequate consultation processes resurfaced strongly in the early 1980s when the first wave of implementation was starting to settle and the effects of this were

beginning to be evident (Carman 1980; Franklin, Rawlings and Craven 1983; Horn 1983; Craven, Franklin and Rawlings 1984; Le Roux 1983). The fact was that the pace of change not only in education, but in society at large, was gathering speed.

## **BTEC**

By 1982 the logic for the merger of TEC and BEC which had been a part of Haslegrave's original vision had become irresistible and late that year the two bodies jointly put forward merger proposals which were immediately accepted by Government (BTEC 1994a). BTEC was thereby formally established on 1 January 1983 and it took over from TEC and BEC on 1 October 1983 (BTEC 1984c). The rationale for the merger included the needs of industry for courses which contained both technical and business studies; the need for broader based studies for those in the 16-19 age group; the more economic use of resources within the councils; and the need for greater uniformity of approach in a situation where many employers and colleges were involved with both councils (BTEC 1987). Perhaps the most compelling reason for merger, however, was political, for the new Council, catering for around 500,000 students, would be hugely influential within VET.

The newly formed BTEC directly employed 168 people with John Sellars as the Chief Executive and David Mitchell, the former Chief Executive of TEC, in the role of Director of Education and Deputy to John Sellars (BTEC 1984a). 1984 saw the publication by BTEC of three major documents. *The Discussion Document on Educational Policy*, published in January (BTEC 1984a), elicited some 514 responses (a return rate of 20 per cent) which were used to inform *A Report on the Responses to the 'Discussion Document on Educational Policy'* which appeared in September (BTEC 1984b). This Report



constituted a relatively comprehensive survey and, despite the fact that the rationalisation which had been sought by Haslegrave was still far from view, the majority of respondents "...favoured retention of the current diversity and the adoption of an evolutionary approach to change". (p. 5) - only 5 per cent felt that immediate change would be advantageous. The third important BTEC document of 1984, also published in September, was *Policies and Priorities into the 1990s* (BTEC 1984c). Here BTEC undertook to "...consolidate the strengths but eliminate the weaknesses of its inheritance from BEC and TEC." (p. 4).

In 1986, through the launch of its BTEC First Awards as the successor to the BEC General which had initially entered the Colleges in 1978, BTEC was able to prevent the newly introduced Certificate of Pre-Vocational Education (CPVE) which had been offered under the aegis of a joint BTEC-CGLI board from establishing itself as a possible rival. Certainly Macfarlane (1993) directly attributes the demise of CPVE to this. This whole incident had been illustrative of the chaos and general lack of coherence within vocational provision in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The "De Ville Report" (MSC/DES 1986) would recommend the establishment of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications as the means by which some semblance of order might be imposed through the creation of a framework of National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).

Several responses to BTEC's *Discussion Document on Educational Policy* (1984a) were reported (BTEC 1984b) to consider that the word "Technician" within the awarding body's name should be replaced by "Technical" "...to broaden the relevance of titles to the courses on offer." (ibid. p. 3). It would, however, be December 1991 before BTEC would quietly change its name from Business and Technician Education Council to Business and



*Technology Education Council*. This dealt with both the “problem” of technician as a category and with the grammatical incongruity of the syntactical conjunction of the concept/activity “Business” alongside “Technician” (denoting an occupational category). The change was effected in a low profile way, perhaps to limit confusion, even though the Council was at the same time promoting itself more strongly with a series of newspaper and radio advertisements. The name “BTEC”, as with BEC and TEC before it, was not widely known beyond the world of further education colleges and this had proved something of a difficulty in gaining recognition for the awards (see some of the views expressed in Chapter 7). University based academic studies of vocational education were sometimes no less clear, and if researchers might be excused for using names for the Council which had become out of date (for example Macfarlane 1993; NCE 1993; Burke 1995; Crombie Ward 1997) others were simply incorrect. Pring (1995), for example, referred to the Business *Examination* Council. Even as late as 1998 at least four academic papers would demonstrate this propensity for getting BTEC’s name wrong. This imprecision is probably symptomatic of something in relation to the question of the extent to which BTEC has managed to penetrate the consciousness of those outside of its immediate orbit, including some of those who research the vocational curriculum. At the more prosaic level of everyday usage, in correspondence it has been far from unusual for employers and others to refer to the “B.Tech.”, thereby either demonstrating or setting up the potential for confusion with the Bachelor of Technology degree.

With the publication of the White Paper *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES/DE/WO 1991) the Government announced its intention to introduce General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQs) and the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ), which had been

established in 1986, was invited to draw up criteria for the new qualifications and to co-ordinate the development and introduction of GNVQs into schools and colleges in September 1992 (NCVQ 1991). By this time the attempt to rationalise British VET was gathering new pace and, paradoxically, new complexities in ways which the BTEC policy statement of 1984 (BTEC 1984c) had been unable directly to anticipate. Sellars (1992) referred to the way in which BTEC had "...spent much energy..." (p. 4) in seeking to ensure that the best features of the provision that it had developed would be retained within the GNVQs which were being developed. During 1991, and in the light of the implications of *Education and Training for the Twenty First Century* (DES/DE/VO 1991), BTEC increased its lobbying activity becoming proactive by making presentations to groups of politicians (Sellars 1992).

Hyland's (1994a) suggestion that,

It is little wonder that awarding bodies such as BTEC are offering such enthusiastic and full-blooded support for GNVQs...; the new qualifications are nothing more than reworked and reconstituted BTEC courses! (and, what is more, are seen as such by many teachers... (p. 107)

is understandable in that BTEC were practically obliged by the powers invested in the NCVQ to support GNVQs, and the structure did have certain continuities with the BEC/BTEC National Diploma (see Chapter 6), but the reality was that BTEC had not been entirely at ease with developments flowing from *Education and Training for the 21st Century* (DES/DE/VO 1991). The 1992 version of the BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance (BTEC 1992a) had the characteristics of a "bridging exercise" and throughout that year BTEC and the other awarding bodies had been working closely with NCVQ in order to ensure "coherence". In August 1993 NCVQ published *The Awarding Bodies Common Accord* (NCVQ 1993a) which set out an agreed

common terminology and approach to quality assurance, it also clearly signaled that BTEC, City and Guilds and the RSA Examinations Board were firmly “under control”. Sharp (1998) has outlined the dominance of NCVQ, and in particular its Deputy Director Gilbert Jessup, in the design of the GNVQ curriculum. Furthermore, Sharp effectively argues that BTEC saw NCVQ’s proposals as jeopardizing all that the BTEC National had achieved in gaining relatively widespread recognition within HE and amongst employers. Williams (1999) has also referred to the “reluctance” of BTEC to “...adapt their products to the NCVQ’s competence based NVQ specifications.” (p. 156), a reluctance which, Williams suggests, was directly responsible for the invention of GNVQs as a device “...to encompass BTEC qualifications...” (p. 157). More fundamentally, the consequence of NCVQ power was that by 1993, as Tony Newbould , (formerly the BTEC officer responsible for Business and Finance), would reflect from the distance of his retirement, “...the central role of curriculum development has largely been taken away from BTEC...” (Newbould 1993 p. 8). Sellars however, at the end of his tenure at BTEC, defended GNVQs against the televised *Dispatches* attack made by Smithers (1993),

I think that the research basis for that report is at least dubious. There is a little too much apocryphal content, having said that, I believe that NCVQ’s [see NCVQ 1994a] “blow by blow” justification is also somewhat naive. We are afterall talking about a major change, drawing on much that BTEC has done...Smithers has surveyed a two year programme half way through the first year and come to some very strong conclusions, which is at least remarkable...a confrontation has been set up. BTEC is outside of this, but we are up to our ears in GNVQ. Almost 60,000 young people started GNVQs in September 1993...so we have got to get the product right by continuous improvement rather than tear it up and start all over again. (interview, 25 January 1994)



Other extracts from the above interview hinted at the tensions which Sharp's work (1998) identified as acute, for example,

You suggested that we were dragged in "screaming and kicking" [in response to a question about NCVQ's insistence on the external testing of GNVQs] the thing that we worried about and still do, was pushing people into a mechanistic system and losing the flexibility needed for local relevance in the programme. (interview, 25 January 1994)

Edwards (1997) has observed that GNVQs have received far more attention than did their BTEC predecessor. This is true, and it is also the case that the advent of GNVQ served to obscure the continued existence of BTEC as a body. Although now a large awarding body BTEC has, since April 1996, been subsumed within Edexcel. Though at various times during their existence BEC, and then BTEC, were massively influential within and beyond the further education sector, they never enjoyed a high profile. Relatively few BEC/BTEC teachers have written about their experiences in working with the curriculum, and it is not likely that many of the academic researchers who have given it their attention have worked within it.

One particular myth which appears to have gathered currency is the idea that BEC/BTEC, as an *awarding* rather than an *examining* body, gave teachers relative freedom with regard to their classroom practice. Pring (1995) stated that "...within BTEC certainly there was a great deal of flexibility; courses were spelt out in terms of general framework and criteria, rather than (as in the case of A Levels) content to be covered." (p. 53). Whilst this quite properly underlines the fact that BEC/BTEC teachers had freedom about what

to teach (within the broad remit of the module), it appears to miss the point that detailed “Aims”, “General Objectives” and closely broken down and stated “Learning Objectives” can be far more prescriptive than a mere indication of content to be covered. Furthermore, the demands of integrated assignments linked across modules meant that once a scheme of work had been devised there was very little freedom to change the sequence laid down or even to vary the pace of progression. In practice this could often be something of a treadmill. Ainley and Bailey (1997) have quite properly suggested that BTEC’s “...approach left room for teachers to include relevant knowledge in the units and modules which, like CSE mode threes in schools, they could design and assess themselves.” (p. 27). There was indeed some opportunity for creativity and freedom on the part of lecturers, but this was generally less so than might be found in the context of a typical A Level syllabus. Raggatt (1991) has outlined how,

BTEC...operated as a validating body by establishing a contract with a centre to deliver an approved programme. Centres, wishing to offer a BTEC qualification, design their own course and apply to BTEC for approval. Quality controls are built into the approval stage through requirements that applications set out how the centre intends to involve local employers, the aims of the course, its structure, its intended learning strategies, course management, methods of assessment and an outline of the evaluation proposed. BTEC publishes its criteria for standards in those areas, including guidelines for evaluation. ‘Moderators’ visit centres to discuss the presentation of the course, focusing on course management, teaching and learning strategies, assessment and, in the later stages of the course, on course evaluation. In effect, a process model of control is used. (p. 73)

That there was a process model of control was absolutely the case but, as Chapter 6 will illustrate, it was a process of compliance. Centres did not at the National level, at least in any meaningful way, “design their own course” but merely explained to BEC/BTEC how they intended to operationalise that



which was very clearly laid down. Whilst centre devised modules could be written these were rare and they had to be produced in accordance with specified formats. Furthermore, centre devised modules were often, when submitted for approval, substantially amended by BEC/BTEC. John Sellars has been quoted above bemoaning that GNVQ would spell the end of flexibility and local relevance. BEC/BTEC enabled teachers, usually working collectively in teams, to decide on the number and the detail of assignments. However, it was carefully prescribed that

...proposals for assignments should be a subject for discussion between the BEC Moderator, the Course Co-ordinator and the Course Team. It is the responsibility of the Moderator to approve those to be included in the assessment... (BEC 1977b p. 13)

The centre-devised assignment programmes and examinations (later to be termed examination assignments and then, in some centres, terminal assignments) were a massive, and generally positive, staff development by action learning process for a great many FE staff. After years of isolated individualised traditional teaching the demands which BTEC made for co-operative working were, for many, exhilarating. Others, unable to cope with the change of culture, drifted into early retirement. It should be recognised, however, that the freedoms and flexibility which BEC/BTEC afforded were, in reality, sheathed in an unprecedented plethora of guidance on learning methods and implementation strategies. The system of centre approval and BEC/BTEC Moderators (later verifiers), combined with assessment panels and annual reviews (BTEC 1993c and 1993d; BTEC 1994c), constituted a bureaucratic quality control mechanism. A consequence of this was that many



staff in further education colleges came to consider themselves to be working in a new environment of diktat and surveillance. This was, perhaps, the start of a process which would in time, through the changes which culminated in the twin challenges of GNVQ and NVQ cultures of facilitation and "tick box" assessment, taken together with the FEFC inspection regime, contribute to the demoralisation of the FE lecturing profession. As Bloomer (1997) has recognised, BTEC National courses were "...bound by a fairly detailed, over-arching prescription of distinctive qualities..." and "...in the minds of many of those who experienced them...were located within a coherent BTEC philosophy and practice." (p. 48). In order to examine the BEC/BTEC curriculum which the institution which was BEC/BTEC during the twenty years from 1974-94 created, the chapter which follows will be concerned with the nature, content and development of the BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance.

## Chapter Six

### TRACING THE EVOLUTION OF THE BEC/BTEC CURRICULUM

#### Introduction

...there are real difficulties in attempting to work with a definition of curriculum which excludes from consideration the unplanned effects of teacher activity, as the notions of the 'hidden' and the 'actual' or 'received' curriculum indicate. There are more aspects to curriculum than are dreamed of in the philosophy of most teachers, and certainly of most politicians... (Kelly 1989) (p. 14)

The notion of the curriculum has, for many years now, been recognised as inherently complex. Earlier, and simpler, definitions of the curriculum as "what is officially taught" or "the subjects to be studied" have, however, retained some utility. Whilst these things do not tell the whole story of an educational experience, they do indicate something of significance in the character of a learning programme. Nonetheless it is also necessary, especially in relation to BEC/BTEC, not only to outline *what* was studied but also to incorporate a consideration of *how* it was studied and in what context. In a recent and influential study of the modern condition of England Hoggart (1995) has referred to the further education institutions, which have been the primary home of BTEC awards, as the "Cinderella" of education, "...the most unsung, unprotected and unfashionable educational area". (p. 37). See the section *The Further Education College as a Workplace in Transition* in Chapter 4 for a discussion of the context within which the BEC/BTEC curriculum was implemented. For Hoggart vocationalism is seen as

...one way of avoiding difficult choices of value, of looking seriously at the injustice which runs through the educational system. It provides a functional area for anyone ill at ease with every other kind of educational purpose. Its jargon reinforces the sense of disaffection, from 'market-orientated' through 'cost effective' to all the rest. (p. 22)

As previously argued, since the incorporation of FE Colleges in 1993 the rate of change within the sector has induced in many staff a sense of trauma as

an ethos of managerialism (Avis 1996a; Elliott 1996a; Randle and Brady 1997) has pervaded their work in terms of their conditions of service and the structure and content of the curriculum which they "deliver". Aspects of this environment (Chapter 4), and of various stakeholder's perspectives on the BEC/BTEC curriculum (Chapter 6), are considered elsewhere in this study. The concern here will be primarily to discuss BEC/BTEC in the older narrower sense of the term curriculum, that is the structure and the "subjects" (modules/units). How the BEC/BTEC curriculum was meant to be operationalised will not be neglected. Naturally this will entail some consideration of the underlying philosophy. Use will be made of college archives of correspondence and internal communications, "official" curriculum documents, course specifications, and material gathered from interviews and questionnaires (see *Table 2* on p. 39 in Chapter 1 for details of the sample). This chapter is also based on the experience of some 15 years teaching BEC/BTEC programmes including 8 years as a Course Co-ordinator having regular direct contact with the awarding body and its moderators/verifiers.

Following the rise of NCVQ in the late 1980s, the arrival of GNVQs in September 1993 effectively signaled the end of BTEC as a curriculum design body, and since this study is essentially concerned with the BEC and BTEC National awards there was a temptation to close discussion at the point where the last substantial cohort of BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance students left their colleges in June 1994 (see *Appendix D*). In one sense their departure, despite the fact that a small number of centres continue to offer the award (which will soon be withdrawn completely), marked the closure of what had been three distinct "generations" of the BTEC curriculum. The third and final of these, however, issued in September 1992, presented a clear link to the GNVQ model which was to quickly follow and which would continue to be issued under the BTEC imprimatur, (along



with those of the City and Guilds of London Institute and the Royal Society of Arts), together with a NCVQ “kitemark”. For this reason, and because sometimes what follows a historical period may offer retrospective insight, the part of this account which broadly outlines the development of the curriculum will include details of what followed the BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance in the form of the BTEC Advanced GNVQ in Business. In order to encompass the whole of the period from the commencement of BEC to now, the two generations of GNVQ which have all but superseded purely BTEC devised curricula at the National level, together with that which is currently being developed will be examined as a “six generation model”. The theoretical disjuncture or “fault line” between generation 3 (the last of what was “real BTEC”), and generation 4 (the first of Advanced GNVQ) should be borne in mind. In practice, however, these two curricula were quite closely related for reasons connected with the politics of the relationship between BTEC and NCVQ. Aside from the sections below which describe the six generations of the dominant curriculum model in post-compulsory education over the last twenty years, this study will be concerned primarily with the BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance and not the GNVQ which is now attracting the kind of interest amongst researchers which generally eluded its predecessor.

It should be noted that the use of the term “generation” here, together with a number suffix to indicate which particular version/phase of the curriculum is being referred to, is peculiar to the model outlined below in this study (and summarised in *Table 5* which runs over pages 196-199). It is not, to my knowledge, a term in use elsewhere and does not relate to other available schema.

Morris (1977) criticised the research base on which BEC was founded and on which its initial proposals for curriculum development were formulated. No significant research data was published by the newly established body and references to working parties and the needs of industry were alarmingly vague. The actual processes by which the original course specifications were produced were not guaranteed to promote confidence. Pearce (1978), a supporter of BEC and a direct participant in the development of the first core modules, described how voluntary working parties of experienced teachers, each with its own brief, were assembled in the Regent Palace Hotel, London in February 1977 for a series of two day sessions. Working intensively, and co-ordinated by specialists from the colleges of education (technical) and members of the BEC Boards who "...furnished a sustained attack on obscure language and unduly elevated diction..." (ibid. p. 6), these groups drafted the course specifications which were then subsequently reworked and co-ordinated by BEC Officers. This was a *modus operandi* that BEC and BTEC would continue to use in the development of course specifications. According to Pearce, whilst the products of the working groups were reworded, little of substance was changed. He was proud of what had been produced, stating his belief that "...there is enormous potential amongst the colleges for imaginative and innovative work." (p. 8). What follows will attempt to outline what underpinned those sessions at the Regent Palace Hotel, and what came after.

### **The Underlying Philosophy of BEC/BTEC**

The major tenets of the "course philosophy" suggested at Paragraph 37 in BEC's *Consultative Document* (1975) were as follows:

### *1. Coherence and Inter-relatedness*

A BEC course "...must consist of a coherent and inter-related group of components...". It was made clear that the teaching and learning methods deployed would need to "...emphasise the interrelationship between the knowledge and skills developed in the course..." (p. 10).

### *2. 75 - 90 Hours of "Guided Study" per Module*

This would include "...lectures, tutorials, seminars, private study and the use of other learning resources..." (p. 11).

### *3. Four Basic Design Criteria*

All courses would need to meet the four criteria of developing skill in the use of "...plain written and spoken English..."; developing "...basic communication skills using number and symbols..."; there would be an emphasis "...at all times..." on the application of "...the subject matter..." including the use of simulated business situations; and, finally, course design should "...inculcate in students an understanding of the technological environment..." (p. 11)

### *4. A Common Core of Three Pairs of Modules*

To ensure a progression of knowledge and skills core modules would be paired, with successful completion of the first module of the pair being a requirement for study of the second. These core modules would be common to all BEC awards at the same level in the same field of activity.

As a consultative statement of course philosophy the BEC document must be regarded as a major disappointment, not so much in terms of the absence of a fully grounded rationale and exposition of principle, but rather in the lack of an articulated vision. The following extract is taken from the written response made by one Head of Business Studies in a large technical college,

Opportunities must be given to all at 16+ to develop as fully as possible both personally and vocationally. In this sense Para 37 is too narrow. Future BEC documents should contain a commitment in the course aims to the personal education and development of the student as well as the more vocational aspects of his programme.



(from *HTC BEC/BTEC Archive*, letter dated 21 October 1975)

The above was part of one of "over 300" submissions which BEC received (BEC 1976 p. ii), though none were published. Neither BEC's *First Policy Statement* (1976), nor the first Course Specifications when they appeared in 1977 (BEC 1977b), would directly address the issue of education of the person other than in relation to the functional needs of business. It would be important to develop a student's knowledge and understanding of "...how to work with or get the best out of people..." and they would need the ability to "...learn and use the form of communication appropriate to the task..." (BEC 1976 p. iv). The only real "underlying philosophy" related development represented in the *First Policy Statement* was the introduction of the concept of "Central Themes" which would serve as integrative factors and which, the Council suggested, permeated all business activity (these will be discussed on p. 201 below). Notwithstanding this it was announced that

...Council has decided that it will not require a separate package labeled 'liberal' or 'general' education for which a percentage of the total teaching and learning time should be set aside. It is the Council's view that success in gaining a BEC award should indicate that the student has benefited from both a general and vocational education at a particular level. (ibid. p. v)

The general tone of the *First Policy Statement* was not one which created much in the way of confidence in or enthusiasm for "the newcomer". Whilst change is rarely welcomed when imposed from outside there was, at the time, a sense that FE Business Studies Departments were in need of a new direction. What that direction would be was still unclear, and BEC's declaration in March 1976 that an essential need was for it to "...find out the requirements for business education and the costs of meeting these requirements..." (ibid. p. v) gave little clue as to what the future might hold.

In May 1977 *The Initial Guidelines on the Implementation of Policy* (BEC 1977a) together with the BEC National Course Specification for Courses in

Business, Finance, Distribution and Public Administration (BEC 1977b) which appeared in the Autumn of that year, despite the absence of any real philosophically grounded statement, strongly indicated that BEC did indeed possess a clear vision of how its courses would be delivered. Based on learning objectives which were derived from behaviourist principles, the curriculum prescribed (not an inappropriate word) a pedagogy which would place emphasis on an highly integrated approach to delivery and a strongly student centred ethos. If BEC had not fully outlined its expectations through an explanation of the philosophical origin of the ideas which had been influential on it then the implementation guidelines provided partial compensation for those seeking a clear guide. What was required of college lecturers was both coherently stated and not left in any doubt within the course specification (BEC 1977b). The coherence of expression, however, masked certain implicit contradictions.

John Sellars (1977), three years into his twenty year role as Chief Officer (later Chief Executive) of BEC/BTEC, introduced the courses as awards with a strong vocational focus, linking the educational objectives very firmly to the world of work. The courses would "...increase the student's awareness of certain necessary abilities, attitudes, knowledge, and skills fundamental for the business employee..." (p. 15). Sellars announced that college staff would face a "major challenge" moving away from "academic subjects" and the "...compartmentalisation of course material..." (p. 16). It was already evident that the soon to be born curriculum would be radical in terms of its approach to learning, but lacking in critical reflection and ambition with regard to the question of what vocational education might encompass beyond the functional needs of business.



Anderson (1984) argued that BEC courses represented neither the rationalist position that "...truth is based on insight into principles untouched by the confusing world of the senses..." nor the belief of the empiricist that "...truth is personal and derives from his interaction with his environment..." (p. 15). For Anderson the BEC philosophy was indistinguishable from Dewey's instrumentalist view of knowledge. He argued that,

Dewey's ideas on child centredness, co-operation of students, the importance of the group, the role of the teacher, inter-relatedness of subject matter, the enquiry method, the importance of experience and relevance and his criticisms of the traditional classroom layout, individual learning and the 'authoritative inculcation of fact', are all ideas to be found in BEC publications. (p. 16)

Further suggesting that the value of knowledge, seen from the Deweyan perspective, was not intrinsic but rather arose from the extent to which it served the purpose of enquiry. In the context of vocational education this lead inescapably to the conclusion that students would have no real need of the modes of inquiry associated with traditional academic disciplines.

The new awards which BEC outlined in 1977 (BEC 1977b) were, arguably, to constitute the most important instance of the category of courses which came collectively to be known as the "new vocationalism" (Bates *et al* 1984). Notwithstanding this, they would receive relatively little recognition from curriculum researchers and historians. A key feature of these courses, and one that should be properly considered as a possible aspect of underlying philosophy, is that they carried many characteristics of progressive education (Avis 1991). A recent special issue of the *Journal of Education and Work* (Vol. 11 No. 2) was dedicated to the relationship between educational progressivism and GNVQs and the papers featured (Bates, Bloomer, Hodgkinson and Yeomans 1998; Bates 1998b; Bloomer 1998; Hodgkinson 1998; and Yeomans 1998), although not dealing specifically with BEC/BTEC



National, contained a number of relevant arguments and will be referred to in various sections throughout this chapter.

Bates , Bloomer, Hodgkinson and Yeomans (1998) point to the romantic and fundamentally anti-industrial roots of progressivism. They suggest, however, that the rejection of discipline boundaries and the emphasis on experiential learning were both important characteristics of progressivism which were an integral part of the expressed ideology of the new vocationalism. The paper goes on to argue that since the advent of the new vocationalism in the late 1970s there have been three overlapping phases. The first involved an "...intertwining of economic and liberal values..." (p. 114) which was represented by a loosely regulated curriculum which emphasised choice (an example cited is the Certificate in Pre-Vocational Education). The second phase was a repositioning of educational institutions as more directly subject to the needs of the economy; with regard to FE this is exemplified by the creation of the National Council for Vocational Qualifications in 1986. The third phase, they term *controlled vocationalism*, this being a point at which control over the content of the curriculum had switched to the Government and its agencies. This is the context, they suggest, through which the GNVQ (Generation 4 below) was brought into existence. The progressive credentials of GNVQ are identified as its *claims* to

...the promotion of equality of opportunity through the creation of a high status vocational pathway; the expansion of individual choice through the opening up of an alternative curriculum and, within any GNVQ the opportunity for further choice between modules; and the development of learner autonomy or empowerment through sharing with students responsibility for control over their own learning. (pp. 115-116)

All these claimed features were broadly characteristic of the BEC National in 1979. It will be contended in due course, however, that the BEC National was not one of those curricula emerging in the late 1970s/early 1980s which could

be conceived as offering a high level of freedom/flexibility for students and staff (though this is a suggestion which has been made elsewhere, see, for example, Pring 1995).

Stronach (1989) has pointed out the congruencies between such concepts as “participation”, “negotiation”, “collaboration”, and “ownership” in student-centred learning with various humanistic organisation theories, suggesting that

...it could be argued that the ‘new pedagogy’ is the least educational feature of vocationalism - it turns up everywhere as a form of management for change, a recipe for adaptation for continuous change, a nostrum for contemporary crises. What seems to be a theory of education turns out to be a theory of productivity for troubled times. (p. 172)

Stronach acknowledges that such theories *may* well be educational, but also considers that they

...usually involve a subtle or not so subtle alienation from the self...a theory of productivity has by definition an uneducational assumption (that we ought to produce X), making it the more unlikely that such approaches could develop the critical reflectiveness to ask questions such as ‘why produce?’ and ‘with what effects on whom?’ (p. 173)

It is this problem of ultimate instrumentality within a particular set of economic relations which, in the final analysis, fatally impugns the *educational* integrity of any vocational curriculum whilst at the same time validating it as *training*. This contradiction was at the heart of the BEC/BTEC project from its very inception.

## **Six Generations of a Curriculum**

Since the inception of BEC courses in the late 1970s there has been a three-tier system for the Council's awards on the basis indicated in *Table 4* below:

**[see over]**

<b>Table 4: The Levels of BEC/BTEC Awards</b>	
<b>General/First/Intermediate</b>	<b>CERTIFICATE/DIPLOMA</b>
(Originally BEC General, later BTEC First, then BTEC Intermediate GNVQ)	
Broadly equivalent to GCE Ordinary Level/GCSE	
<b>National/Advanced</b>	<b>CERTIFICATE/DIPLOMA</b>
(Originally BEC National, later BTEC National, then BTEC Advanced GNVQ)	
Broadly equivalent to GCE Advanced Level	
<b>Higher National</b>	<b>CERTIFICATE/DIPLOMA</b>
Broadly equivalent to pass degree level	

The development of BEC/BTEC as an awarding body has been discussed in Chapter 5 above, but it is worth recalling here that, formally set up on 21 May 1974, the remit of the Business Education Council was to

...plan, administer and keep under review the development of a unified national pattern of courses in the field of business studies at levels below that of first degree...and to this end to devise or approve suitable courses, establish and assess standards of performance, and award certificates and diplomas as appropriate. (BEC 1974) (p. 1)

In the eighteen years between 1979 and 1995 BEC and its successor body BTEC published three distinct versions of the National/Advanced level curriculum in Business, with a further two NCVQ directed versions appearing under the BTEC logo (as well as being published by the CGLI and RSA). The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), which superceded the NCVQ on 1 October 1997 (NCVQ 1997), published draft details of a sixth version on its web site in May and July 1999 [QCA (1999) <http://www.qca.org.uk>] as part of its consultation and information dissemination exercise preliminary to a



proposed launch of redesigned Advanced units in September 2000. As referred to above, for the purposes of this study these will be referred to as Generation 1, Generation 2 and so on. Generation 1, in comparison to the Ordinary National Diploma (OND) awards which it superceded in 1979, represented a revolution in thinking and practice. Each of the subsequent generations introduced varying degrees of change in relation to terminology, structure, content and modes of assessment. The fundamental philosophy of a student-centred approach to learning, however, remained inviolate throughout the BEC/BTEC derived curricula. *Table 5* below, running over four pages, attempts to outline the main features of each development in a linear chronological format. A brief narrative description of each of the five generations which have been issued will be provided before moving to a more detailed discussion focusing on particular aspects such as the underlying philosophy, structure, content, learning strategies, assessment regimes and other related matters.

**[see over]**



Table 5: AN OUTLINE OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BTEC NATIONAL DIPLOMA IN BUSINESS & FINANCE/ADVANCED GNVQ IN BUSINESS 1979-2000						
Page 1 of 4	GENERATION 1 BEC National Diploma in Business Studies	GENERATION 2 BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance	GENERATION 3 BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance	GENERATION 4 Advanced GNVQ in Business	GENERATION 5 Advanced GNVQ in Business	GENERATION 6 Advanced GNVQ in Business [Consultative Drafts]
<b>Introduced</b>	September 1979	September 1986	September 1992	September 1993	September 1995	September 2000
<b>Programme Length</b>	2 years	2 years	No set time	No set time	No set time	No set time
<b>Entry Reqrmnt.</b>	BEC General with credit or 4 GCE 'O' Levels at grades A-C. 'Exceptional entry' if 19 years +.	BEC General with credit or 4 GCSEs at grades A-C. 'Exceptional entry' if able to benefit from programme.	Age 16. Open access with an equal opportunities ethos.	Age 16. Open access with equal opportunities ethos.	Age 16. Open access with equal opportunities ethos.	Age 16. Open access with equal opportunities ethos.
<b>Model</b>	<p><b>'Modules':</b> Aims General Objectives Learning Objectives</p> <p><b>Central Themes:</b></p> <p><b>Cross Modular Assignments:</b></p>	<p><b>'Units':</b> Aims General Objectives Indicative Content</p> <p><b>Business Related Skills</b></p> <p><b>Cross Course Themes -</b> Money; Technology; Change.</p>	<p><b>'Modules':</b> Aims <b>Outcomes -</b> performance criteria; range statements; evidence indicators.</p> <p><b>Core Skills.</b></p>	<p><b>'Units':</b> <b>Elements -</b> performance criteria; range statements; evidence indicators; 'amplification'; guidance.</p> <p><b>Core Skills Units.</b></p>	<p><b>'Units':</b> Aims <b>Elements -</b> performance criteria; range statements; evidence indicators; 'amplification'; guidance.</p> <p><b>Core (Later changed to 'Key') Skills Units.</b></p>	<p><b>'Units':</b> Set out learning students must cover.</p>
<b>Structure</b>	<p>6 Core Modules</p> <p>6 Option Modules</p> <p>Concurrent study of GCE A Levels "not encouraged".</p> <p>/continued over...</p>	<p>5 Core</p> <p>7 Option Units</p> <p>Business Related Skills</p> <p>Concurrent study of GCE A Levels "not encouraged".</p> <p>/continued over...</p>	<p>8 Core Modules</p> <p>8 Option Modules</p> <p>Common Skills</p> <p>Concurrent study of GCE A Levels "not encouraged".</p> <p>/continued over...</p>	<p>8 Mandatory Units</p> <p>4 Option Units</p> <p>3 Core Skills Units</p> <p>Additional Units (could be added if required)</p> <p>Could be studied in conjunction with GCE A Levels.</p> <p>/continued over...</p>	<p>8 Mandatory Units</p> <p>4 Option Units</p> <p>3 Core Skills Units</p> <p>Additional Units (could be added if required)</p> <p>Could be studied in conjunction with GCE A Levels.</p> <p>/continued over...</p>	<p>12, 6, and 3 Unit awards to be available to promote flexibility and mix and match (with GCE 'A' Levels and work).</p> <p>'Part One' GNVQs available from Sept. 1999. Revised version from Sept. 2000 will use 1995 units + 'modified assessment regime'. /cont. over...</p>



Page 2 of 4	GENERATION 1 BEC National Diploma in Business Studies	GENERATION 2 BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance	GENERATION 3 BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance	GENERATION 4 Advanced GNVQ in Business	GENERATION 5 Advanced GNVQ in Business	GENERATION 6 Advanced GNVQ in Business [Consultative Drafts]
Core Modules/ Units	People and Communications	People in Organisations 1 & 2	Business Structures and Goals	Business in the Economy	Business in the Economy	Business at Work
	Numeracy and Accounting	Finance	Business Environment Marketing Process	Business Systems Marketing	Business Orgs. & Systems; Marketing	The Competitive Business Environment; Marketing
	The Organisation in its Environment 1 & 2	The Organisation in its Environment 1 & 2	Physical Resources	Human Resources	Human Resources	Human Resources
	Administration in Business		Financial Resources	Employment in the Market Economy	Production and Employment in the Economy; Financial Transactions, Costing and Pricing	Managing Operations
Themes	Accounting 2		Human Resources	Financial Transactions and Monitoring	Financial Forecasting and Monitoring; Business Planning	Business Finance
			Innovation and Change	Financial Resources Business Planning		
	<b>‘Central’:</b>	<b>‘Cross Course’:</b>	None	None	None	None
	Money	Money				
	People	Technology				
	Communication	Change				
	A Logical and Numerator Approach to Business Problems					
	/continued over...	/continued over...	/continued over...	/continued over...	/continued over...	/continued over...



Page 3 of 4	GENERATION 1 BEC National Diploma in Business Studies	GENERATION 2 BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance	GENERATION 3 BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance	GENERATION 4 Advanced GNVQ in Business	GENERATION 5 Advanced GNVQ in Business	GENERATION 6 Advanced GNVQ in Business [Consultative Drafts]
<b>Skills</b>	None identified	Learning and Studying Working With Others Communicating Numeracy Information Gathering Information Processing Identifying and Tackling Problems Design and Visual Discrimination	Managing and Developing Self; Working with and Relating to Others; Communicating; Applying Numeracy Applying Technology Managing Tasks and Solving Problems Applying Design and Creativity	<b>Core Skills:</b>  Communication Application of Number InformationTechnology <b>Additional Skills</b> Working With Others  Improving Own Learning and Performance Problem Solving	<b>Core [later 'Key'] Skills:</b>  Communication Application of Number InformationTechnology <b>Additional Skills</b> Working With Others  Improving Own Learning and Performance Problem Solving	<b>Key Skills:</b>  Communication Application of Number Information Technology [Skills To be separately certificated. GNVQ award independent of Key Skills].
<b>Assess- ment</b>	In-course through assignments.  End of module exams. (internally set).  BEC Moderated.  /continued over...	In-course through assignments.  End of unit 'final assignments' (internally set).  BTEC Moderated.  /continued over...	Recording Evidence of Achievement (in- course assignments, simulations, work placement tasks etc.).  Portfolio Building.  Accreditation of Prior Learning.  BTEC Verified.  /continued over...	External testing for mandatory units (multiple choice tests);  Recording evidence of achievements.  Grading Themes  Portfolio Building.  Accreditation of Prior Learning.  BTEC Verified.  /continued over...	External testing for mandatory units (multiple choice tests);  Recording evidence of achievements.  Grading Themes  Portfolio Building.  Accreditation of Prior Learning.  BTEC Verified.  /continued over...	Assessment criteria 'contextualised for each unit'. No separate generic grading criteria. 'Standards moderation' to replace external verification. One third of overall assessment external set and marked by awarding bodies. Nature of external assessment to vary according to unit.  /continued over...



Page 4 of 4	GENERATION 1 BEC National Diploma in Business Studies	GENERATION 2 BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance	GENERATION 3 BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance	GENERATION 4 Advanced GNVQ in Business	GENERATION 5 Advanced GNVQ in Business	GENERATION 6 Advanced GNVQ in Business [Consultative Drafts]
Grading	F E / D C B A for modules.  Overall Pass or Distinction for the award as a whole.	Fail Refer Pass Merit Distinction for units.  Overall Pass for award.	Fail Refer Pass Merit Distinction for modules.  Overall Pass for award.	Pass only for units.  Overall Merit and Distinction available for portfolio.  <b>Grading Themes:-</b> Planning; Information Seeking; Evaluation were introduced.	Pass only for units.  Overall Merit and Distinction available for portfolio.  <b>Grading Themes:-</b> Planning; Information Seeking; Evaluation; + <b>Quality</b> .	Grades E D C B A to be available for each unit.  Each grade to be worth a given number of points, added together to give a grade for the whole qualification.
'Philosophy'	Application of knowledge, understanding and skills.  Integration of knowledge/modules.  Student centred.  'Realistic' assignments.  No work experience requirement.	Application of knowledge, understanding and skills.  Integration.  Student centred.  'Realistic' assignments.  Development of vocational skills.  Work experience (or simulation) required.	Development of vocational skills, knowledge and understanding.  Integration ( individual units available).  Student centred.  'Realistic' assignments.  Skills throughout all units.  Work experience not mandatory - simulations required.  "Roll on/roll off"	<b>NCVQ derived.</b> Skills, Knowledge and understanding. Assessment of achievement.  Student centred.  Work experience not mandatory .  "Roll on/roll off"  Action planning and evaluation	<b>NCVQ derived.</b> Skills, Knowledge and understanding. Assessment of achievement.  Student centred.  Work experience not mandatory .  "Roll on/roll off"  Action planning and evaluation	<b>QCA derived.</b> Skills, knowledge and understanding in a vocational context.  Units written for, and addressed directly to, the students.  [Work experience?]  "Roll on/roll off"  [Action planning and evaluation?]



*A Brief Outline of Generation 1* (see Table 5 above)

Outline module specifications for "Common Core Modules" were first published by BEC as Appendix B to the *Initial Guidelines on the Implementation of Policy* (BEC 1977a). Each of these outlines consisted of a single "Aim", around a dozen "General Objectives" and guidance notes for teachers under the heading "Context". The identified Module areas, together with the titles which were used on publication of the *BEC National Awards: Course Specifications* later in 1977 (BEC 1977b), are shown in *Table 6* which appears below:

Table 6: National Level "Common Core" Modules	
<u>Initial Guidelines "Area"</u> (Published in BEC 1977a [May])	<u>Course Specification Title</u> (Published in BEC 1977b [Autumn])
Communication and Human Relations	People and Communication
Quantitative and Accounting Methods	Numeracy and Accounting
The Business Organisation in its Economic, Legal, Social, and Political Environment (Double Module)	The Organisation in its Environment (Double Module)

The new modules (BEC 1977b) were each written in a format which incorporated four "Aims", a number of "General Objectives", and "Learning Objectives" which were prefixed by classically behaviourist statements to the effect that the student "should be able to:". Each Learning Objective was broken down into a number (usually 3 or 4) of sub-objectives. The Learning Objectives were followed by guidelines on "Implementation" which stressed the need for integration, "realistic assignments", and local relevance.

The overall aims of the awards when they were first launched, as opposed to the particular aims of the modules, are stated in full in *Table 7* below:



**Table 7: Aims of the BEC National Awards**

1. Provide an educational foundation for a range of careers in industry, commerce and public administration, suited to students who hold (a) BEC General Award with credit, or (b) four GCE 'O' levels, or (c) equivalent qualifications.
2. Encourage the development of the understanding and skills implied in the Central Themes with particular emphasis on the improvement of the student's standards of literacy and numeracy.
3. Develop the student's ability to interrelate knowledge, skills and understanding from various parts of the course through practical assignments derived from business contexts.
4. Assist students to develop a flexible response to the changing demands of business and society, which may lead them to further education or training, change in employment or career development.
5. Provide a basis, through appropriate achievement in relevant areas of study, for continuing education and development whether academic, professional or vocational.
6. Provide, through option studies, for the development of vocational skills, knowledge and understanding, which enable the student to be more effective in immediate employment.
7. Enable the student to apply knowledge, understanding and skills gained from the course to work in business by arranging, where possible, for related work experience and/or, in co-operation with employers, by linking assignments to tasks carried out by the student in employment.

From BEC (1977b) (p. 5)

The Central Themes (Money, People, Communication, A Logical Approach to Business Problems) discussed in the pre-launch BEC publications were given due prominence in the course specification. The new notion of "Cross Modular Assignments" (CMAs), described as of "central importance" (BEC 1977b p. 8) and to feature as a discrete element in course assessment during both years of the programme, was introduced. CMAs will be discussed in more depth under the sections on implementation and learning strategies which follow below. Guidelines on implementation of the course stressed the importance of treating the course as an integrated whole, suggesting that a "Course Co-ordinator" should be appointed with responsibility for ensuring that this should happen (ibid. p. 11). The Course Co-ordinator would be the key link-person between the college and BEC and was generally expected to

interpret BEC policy and to proselytize the “BEC way” within a department. A “team approach” to teaching of the programme was strongly recommended.

*A Brief Outline of Generation 2 (see Table 5 above)*

Following the merger of BEC and TEC in 1983 BTEC reviewed its provision leading to the publication in November 1985 of new and substantially revised Guidelines (BTEC 1985a), and Core Unit Specifications (BTEC 1985b), together with sample learning activities for its National Level provision in “Business and Finance” (rather than the now abandoned term “Business Studies”). The new course was to be implemented in September 1986. Modules were now to be termed “Units” and the units were each written with “Aims” and “General Objectives”. The “Learning Objectives” which had been a feature of Generation 1, however, were jettisoned in favour of more flexible “Indicative Content” which was “...not intended to be prescriptive, nor to serve as a ‘checklist’; rather it allows teaching staff to interpret the General Objectives...” (BTEC 1985a p. 3). Innovations included the prioritising of work experience (or simulation) and the introduction of “Cross-course Themes” and “Skill Areas”. The latter, in particular, constituted a major development which would be a prominent feature of subsequent versions.

*A Brief Outline of Generation 3 and Generation 4 (see Table 5 above)*

In September 1991 BTEC published an “Information Pack” (BTEC 1991a) which provided background to imminent changes which were a consequence, firstly, of the fact that the then current BTEC National model was based on a review which was by then some seven years old, and secondly, the growing

influence of the newly formed NCVQ. In October 1991 NCVQ produced a consultation paper (NCVQ 1991) on the proposed GNVQs. The report on this appeared in June 1992 (NCVQ 1992) and many responses showed a concern to retain the strengths of the BTEC National model. Throughout 1992 BTEC officers were working closely with NCVQ and, as stated in chapter 5 above, Generation 3 had all the appearance of a “bridging exercise”. NCVQ were already working on the design of the first GNVQs in the area of business education and in 1991 BTEC had stated that,

It is too early to say what strategies and structures will result, but clearly they will impact considerably on the design of BTEC qualifications. The Minister has noted that certain existing qualifications, notably BTEC ones, already perform the intended functions of GNVQs and has asked that their strengths are built on in this development. (BTEC 1991a p. 3)...BTEC will be prepared to make whatever changes are necessary to fit the ultimate GNVQ criteria, *provided only that the present success of BTEC qualifications in providing the breadth of personal development for varied progression needs would not thereby be impaired.* (ibid. p. 9) [italics not in original]

The tensions felt by BTEC were being made very clear. Generation 3 when published in April 1992 (BTEC 1992a) and May 1992 (1992b) closely foreshadowed the first appearance of the first Advanced GNVQ's mandatory units in Business which NCVQ would issue twelve months later in April 1993 (NCVQ 1993b). The GNVQ optional units were to be offered separately by each of the three awarding bodies (BTEC, CGLI and RSA). Anticipating the open access ethos of GNVQ, Generation 3 of BTEC abandoned the 4 GCSE benchmark which had in any case been applied with increasing flexibility by colleges. New features included “Learning Outcomes” with “Performance Criteria” rather than “Objectives with Indicative Content”. Statements of “Range” would indicate the what was to be covered and “Evidence Indicators”



would provide examples of acceptable assessment evidence for the outcomes. Accreditation of Prior Learning, “roll on/roll off” flexible entry, and portfolio building, all features of Generation 4 (the first GNVQ), were present in Generation 3 of the BEC/BTEC National. Generation 3, however, had also brought the return of “Modules” rather than “Units”, and those college staff who had failed to adapt from the “BTEC speak” of the six years of Generation 1 would now be correct by dint of never having adapted to Generation 2’s “units”, though this would be for 12 months only (Generation 4 would see the second return of units). Lest things should be made too easy, the newly introduced “Outcomes” would now be termed “Elements”. The truly new, and for some, radical features of Generation 4 were the introduction of external testing of 7 of the 8 mandatory units, the use of “grading themes”, and of “action planning”.

*A Brief Outline of Generation 5 (see Table 5 above)*

Generation 5 was published by NCVQ in May 1995 (NCVQ 1995a) for implementation in the September of that year. Colleges had now become used to moving quickly. Relative to previous changes, however, these were easy to absorb. Units were now given a clearer statement of aims together with “Amplification” statements (clarifying key terms used in the elements and providing an indication of depth and scope). Also added was a “Guidance” section relating to each element which suggested teaching and learning approaches as well as identifying links with other elements. A new grading theme “Quality” was added. Overall, Generation 5 provided an upgrade of Generation 4, one which gave both teachers and students more advice and

clarification. It did not, however, address the widely criticised unwieldiness of the assessment. The *GNVQ National Survey Report* from FEFC published in November 1995 (FEFC 1995) stated that "...teachers continued to find much of the documentation from NCVQ and the awarding bodies complex and difficult to interpret." (p. 19) In the same month John Capey's *GNVQ Assessment Review* (NCVQ 1995b) appeared containing a number of recommendations aimed at the simplification and improvement of the assessment regime. It was these pressures which led to the piloting of a new unit and assessment model through 1996-97 and 1997-99 with a view to informing a "streamlined" Advanced GNVQ which in September 2000, will constitute Generation 6 (see Table 5 for a brief indication of this).

### **Entry Requirements and BEC/BTEC Programmes**

For BEC's General (first level) of awards, when introduced in 1978, entry would be on the basis of age (students would "normally" be expected to be at least 16 years old) with an indication of "suitability" and "ability to benefit" from the course (BEC 1976) (p. 4). In reality this usually meant open entry, although in some cases colleges were, in the early years, recruiting students with up to three 'O' Levels. For entry to BEC Higher level awards students would require either a BEC National award or 1 GCE A Level together with three GCE Ordinary Level passes in other subjects. At the National level students would require either a BEC General award at credit level or 4 GCE Ordinary level passes. Additionally there would be provision for "motivated" students over 19, without the minimum academic entry requirements, to be direct entrants to these courses." (ibid. p. 6).



BEC was, initially, quite rigorous in its enforcement of the entry requirements which had been set out in 1976 (BEC 1976). Colleges seeking “exceptional entry” for students had to formally apply using a relatively detailed form (the “E60”) for each candidate individually, and many of these applications were subsequently rejected. Pressure was building for a more flexible approach and the results of BTEC’s 1984 consultation exercise (BTEC 1984b) indicated that 80 per cent of the more than 900 education based respondents favoured “increased access”. Assured by the success of the Open University’s open access policy, as well as research indicating that TEC students with minimum entry requirements performed no worse than those with higher grades, BTEC was also mindful of college pleas for greater discretion in the acceptance of students onto BTEC courses (ibid. p. 13). It was therefore no surprise when the BTEC policy document issued in September 1984 (BTEC 1984c) inserted an italicized “*normal*” before restating its old course entry requirement and promising further guidance. The exceptional entry requirement was, at the same time, considerably softened when the age requirement of 19 years was abolished. Centres, in liaison with their moderators, would be empowered to judge whether a student was “...capable of coping with and benefiting from a course...” (ibid. p. 14). This more autonomous approach was enshrined in the new course guidelines which guidelines were issued by BTEC in 1985 (BTEC 1985a).

Smithers (1991) in a survey of 4,159 BTEC students found that 29.7 per cent of National Diploma and 37.6 per cent of National Certificate students did not have the formal minimum admission requirements. On this basis it may be conservatively conjectured that by the early 1990s something significantly more than a quarter of BTEC National students were “exceptional” entrants. The new guidelines issued in 1992 (BTEC 1992a) maintained the momentum



towards flexible entry stating that, whilst those with a BTEC First Award or four GCSE passes at grade C or above would be likely to “benefit more readily” from the programme,

Decisions on entry should be based on the principles of open access and equality of opportunity. The only mandatory requirement is that the candidate has reached the minimum age of 16 before entry... (ibid. p. 4)

Some college staff were, in consequence of this, concerned at the possibility of an upward drift of applicants from First Level [now Intermediate GNVQ] who would not yet be ready for study at National Level. There is however, as yet, no real evidence that this occurred, though it is worth noting that evidence regarding Advanced GNVQ students suggests that they have lower prior qualification attainments than GCE A Level students [Hodkinson 1998 cites Edwards *et al* (1997) and Wolf (1997) in respect of this]. Perhaps the answer to the question of why the BTEC Intermediate GNVQ programmes continued to recruit lies within the following extract from an interview with John Sellars, then Chief Executive of BTEC, who stated that

...this whole idea of open access came through with GNVQ, I have no problem with that but it came through in a way which was not necessarily as helpful as it might have been when you think that GNVQs were going to be put, by and large, into an education institutional context...A number of things are sharpening the mind, none of them educational...The FEFC pays on entry, on progress and on completion. If too many are taken on the wrong course then money is lost - that is quite persuasive...whatever may be said, I think the thing may be self-correcting... (interview, 25 January 1994, London)

There is no doubt that the perception of BTEC as an “easy” alternative to A Levels served to damage its image. In particular BEC/BTEC students themselves were often drawn to the course on the basis that it was predominantly, and ultimately wholly (prior to Advanced GNVQs), based on

continuous assessment. BTEC students participating in this study, when asked to briefly indicate the reasons why they chose a BTEC course, gave responses which included the following:

*"I did not want to study A Levels as I knew that I would not be able to cope with the heavy examinations and saw the course as a suitable and equally acceptable qualification that would get me into higher education."*

*"This course offers a choice of subjects and it is also assessed by assignments, so you are not doing an exam at the end of the year. It is a good course."*

*"I knew that the BTEC course would be based at College and I had heard BTEC courses were very good and mostly assignments given rather than all exams."*

*"I find practical work more interesting than theory work and BTEC is assessed by coursework and not exams. You get to work with groups on interesting projects and make friends."*

*"I chose a BTEC course because I liked the way the course is run e.g. not exams like A Levels."*

*"Because the results are not based on one exam, they are spread over assignments."*

*"I am not very good at exams and the BTEC is continual assessment."*

*"Because I want to go to university without doing A Levels because I don't like exams!"*

17 of the 37 BTEC students who responded to this question made specific mention of the advantage of continuous assessment/avoidance of examinations. It is therefore ironic that when identifying weaknesses/problems with BTEC courses many former BTEC students referred to the absence of examination experience and the problems which this deficiency had subsequently created for them in HE. It is worth bearing in mind here, (the issue of BEC/BTEC assessment regimes will be covered

more fully below), that the practice regarding the use of terminal examinations in BTEC courses differed greatly between (and within) institutions. In the early years of BEC relatively traditional examinations were not unknown. In the later years of BTEC practice ranged from no examinations of any kind to "examinations" of the pre-seen/open-book/presentation based variety, traditional examinations were then practically "extinct".

### **The Structure/Design of BEC/BTEC Programmes**

BEC's *Consultative Document* (1975) expressed the Council's belief that each course should consist of "...a core of study designed to cover the fundamental knowledge, skills and the application of these in a business environment..." as well as "...additional relevant option modules which would broaden and or deepen the knowledge and skills required in a particular area of employment." (p. 9). In this same document the term "Module" was used and offered to colleges as an encouragement for them to move away from a subject-based approach, though there was a cautious rider that "...the name 'module' is not necessarily one which commends itself to Council" (p. 10). BEC defined a module as "A significant component of a course, not necessarily a subject or discipline, which may be separately assessed and if successfully completed count for credit towards a student's award". (p. 9-10).

BEC's *First Policy Statement* (1976) outlined a system of awards which would be at the three levels of General, National and Higher National (see *Table 4* above). At each level courses leading to a Certificate or a Diploma would be available and these would be awarded at the same level of attainment with the Diploma representing greater breadth through having undertaken more modules. Awards would be made at either pass or credit standard. General awards would be completed in a minimum of 1 year part-time for the



Certificate and 1 year full-time for the Diploma. National and Higher National awards would be of 2 years duration. The Council expected that "...face-to-face instruction and guidance on a full-time course would be not less than 540 hours per year and would not normally exceed 720 hours per year." (ibid. pp. 9 and 11). The standard structure for Generation 1 of the BEC National courses, and the evolution of subsequent generations, is broadly reflected in *Table 5* above and particular aspects will be discussed in the remaining sections of this chapter.

### **The Content of BEC/BTEC Programmes**

John Sellars has remarked that BEC found that in the OND Business Studies which the BEC National was called upon to replace the subjects of Economics, Law, Accounting and Statistics were typically taught by specialists

...who rarely talked to one another, and certainly never thought about how, in combination, their subjects would be applied to a real problem. They all illustrated the development of their subject by the use of a neutered problem which just brought out the legal bit, or the financial bit...One part of integration...was to go to employers and ask "what does a person have to know, understand and be able to do, to be more effective as an employee? Now employer's couldn't answer the question, which in itself was revealing, but by plugging away at that, not unnaturally, you got back "Economics, Accounting, Law", but not in academic jargon or subjects...we parceled those together in "modules"...the lawyer was uncomfortable, as was the accountant...it comes back to...staff development. At one level you could say that was integration, we had restructured what was knowledge and understanding, and it would be more apparent to the student that this actually could be used in "real life". (interview, 25 January 1994, London)

The BEC National curriculum was founded on the conviction that to be relevant to the needs of business it must be based on what employers wanted

from their employees, and that it would appeal to students on the basis of its usefulness in “real life”. The Common Core modules which were first published in 1977 (BEC 1977b) were as follows:

*People and Communication*

*Numeracy and Accounting*

*The Organisation in its Environment 1 & 2* (Double module)

Students following the Business Studies route would also study as cores *Quantitative and Accounting Methods* and *Administration in Business*. Those following a Finance Sector route would study *Accounting 2* with *Administration in Business* as cores. Special alternative “Board Core” double modules existed for the relatively small numbers of students who followed a specialist Distribution or Public Administration focused course. All Diploma students also needed to follow 6 option modules and BEC made a total of 33 option modules available for 1979 (though most colleges would, in practice, offer fewer than 10). Cross-Modular Assignments (CMAs), incorporating core module outcomes, were the major vehicle for generating an inter-disciplinary approach and driving the development of staff teams.

The notion of “Central Themes”, hinted at in the *Consultative Document* (1975) and first explicitly labeled as such in the *First Policy Statement* (1976), were identified as “necessary” in the *Initial Guidelines on the Implementation of Policy* (1977a). These themes would be “Money”, “People”, “the ability to express oneself clearly”, and “familiarity with analytical techniques and work in a technological environment”. When the *BEC National Awards: Course Specification* (1977) was issued later in the same year the latter two themes had been refined into the more succinct “Communication” and “A Logical and

Numerate Approach to Business Problems" respectively. The four themes were seen as integrating factors which would also lend coherence to the core modules. In practice it was difficult for these to be overtly operationalised.

Generation 2 (BTEC 1985a) categorised "cross-course themes" together with skill areas (see *The Evolution of Skills* below) as "Interdisciplinary Themes". Tracing these to the Central Themes of Generation 1, and to the Cross Modular Assignments which were now being abandoned on the basis that they had been so successful that the practice of integration had spread to modular assignments and the intention was that the core as a whole should be delivered through integrated problem solving activities. Three themes were identified which were intended to act as a focus for the design of learning rather than assessment and which BTEC advised "...should permeate the teaching/learning strategies for the core element..." (BTEC 1985a p. 20), these were:- Money; Technology; and Change. On the publication of Generation 3 these themes had disappeared and the importance of skills had been amplified.

By 1980 reactions to the new curriculum were finding their way though into the *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, then the main arena for the discussion of further education issues. Mace (1980) attacked the way in which Economics had been relegated from a substantive component of the old OND to be sub-summed as about 60 per cent of *The Organisation in its Environment* module, thereby losing its individual identity. He argued that BEC had shown itself to be opposed to model building and any kind of theoretical abstractness, thereby failing to prepare students both for higher level professional and academic studies. O'Sullivan (1987), reporting on a



review of Mathematics and Statistics on BEC/BTEC courses, suggested that the National level core modules accorded "...very sparse coverage..." of numeracy but that employers did not see this as a problem since so few jobs called for anything beyond elementary competence in these subjects. The views of many HE admissions tutors would stand in stark contrast (see chapter 7). Hyland (1980) suggested that BEC approaches to integration as operationalised through the Cross Modular Assignments, rather than being based on a "strong" thesis about the unity of knowledge, were simply asserting the "interconnectedness of various themes and objectives..." (p. 74). He also argued that the concern with "problem solving" neglected the fact that this is only a part of business activity and that for business education to be genuinely educational BEC would need to be less concerned with pragmatic approaches to learning, knowledge and teaching.

If the content of the modules closely reflected their pragmatic and vocational origin it was also the case that students were encouraged to contextualise their thinking, albeit in the framework of what the module learning objectives of *The Organisation in its Environment* in the specifications implemented in 1979 (BEC 1977b) referred to as "the working of a mixed economy". Whilst the term "mixed economy" was prominent in the 1985 course specification for the same module (BTEC 1985b) by 1993, post NCVQ influence, the term "Market economy" was showing more prominence (for example the mandatory unit titled *Employment in the Market Economy* had been introduced). If this merely reflected the political *zeitgeist* in general the learning objectives/outcomes/elements associated with the modules/units, after

Generation 2, became more detailed and prescribed with each successive generation of the BTEC/GNVQ curriculum. In order to illustrate this, and also to provide examples of the changing visual formats of the BEC/BTEC/GNVQ curriculum, an instance of one way in which it has dealt with a particular aspect of information technology will be considered below. The 1977 issued module *Administration in Business* contained a General Objective which stated that on completion of the module the student should be able to:

C. UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COMPUTER AS AN INFORMATION TOOL AND BE AWARE OF ITS IMPACT ON ADMINISTRATIVE OPERATIONS.

[This was supported by three Learning Objectives as follows:]

C1. describe the main characteristics of the computer, including both hardware and software, recognising the special need for relevant and accurate input data;

C2. identify the main commercial applications of computers from routine data processing to the provision of management information;

C3. outline the way in which specific administrative procedures have changed in response to the introduction of computer systems;

(BEC 1977b p. 48)

In November 1985 the course specification (BTEC 1985b) for Generation 2 was published and the module *Administration in Business* had been dissolved with most of its content reappearing in the double unit *People in Organisations*. The above general and learning objectives had now been reconceptualised and amended to fit the new format of a "General Objective" with "indicative content" in the core unit *People in Organisations 1* and appeared as follows:

**[see over]**

**D Assess the uses of electronic technology as a means of communication.**

["indicative content" below]

Main commercial applications of computers for routine data processing

Methods of data storage and retrieval

Application of basic word processing and accounting packages

Economic and personal problems associated with the introduction of electronic technology

Impact of computers on the nature and method of information storage and retrieval. (BTEC 1985b p. 5)

This moved well beyond the quite narrow and instrumental Learning Objectives (C1, C2, and C3) which had appeared in Generation 1. Now issues arising from the wider economic and personal (though not social) implications of information technology had been placed on the agenda, and the fact that the content was merely "indicative" rather than prescriptive meant that lecturers could (and many did) raise important social questions arising from the "information revolution". Generation 2 of the BEC/BTEC/GNVQ curriculum would be that which, throughout the units, gave the most flexibility for staff and students. In retrospect it might well be seen as representing the "Golden Age" of BTEC prior to the onset of NCVQ influence and the consequent enforced route march down a *cul de sac* of proliferating performance criteria.

Generation 3 of BEC/BTEC (BTEC 1992a) had seen the learning objectives transmute into the following components of the Core Module *Administrative Systems*:

[see over]



**Outcome 7.3** *Assess the applicability of, and where appropriate use, relevant technology in the operation of administrative procedures and systems*

**Performance Criteria**

- a major applications of technology in administrative operations identified and classified
- b factors affecting efficient and effective use of technology assessed
- c technology required for particular administrative operations recognised and, where appropriate, used effectively
- d introduction of new technology examined and evaluated

**Range**

Manual and computer-based administrative systems

information processing: capture, storage, retrieval and reporting

major software applications: word processing, databases, spreadsheets, desk top publishing, any other major developments

user skills of setting up, operating and closing down

costs and benefits of computer based systems

effect on workforce and environment

health and safety

**Evidence Indicators**

a report of the introduction of a new computer-based administrative system into an organisation

use of business software to solve and report on a business problem

testimonials from workplace supervisor or work diary or portfolio of work placement activities (BTEC 1992a pp. 45-46)

Here the “outcome” has become more focused on “administrative procedures and systems”, losing the wider scope of electronic technology “as a means of communication” which had appeared in Generation 2. The “range” guidance explicitly mentions both “effect on workforce and environment” and “health and safety”, though the “evidence indicators” make clear the specifically business/organisational focus which was expected from students. Twelve months later with the publication of the first Advanced GNVQ in Business

(Generation 4) “outcomes” had given way to “elements” though the general format of units was largely unaltered. The issue of computing/information processing in organisations now appeared in the new unit *Business Systems* as follows:

<b>Element 2.3: Investigate information processing systems</b>	
<b>Performance criteria</b>	
<b>1</b>	purposes of information processing systems used by business organisations are explained
<b>2</b>	a business organisation’s information processing systems are investigated and described
<b>3</b>	effectiveness of systems in supporting the function of the business organisation is evaluated
<b>4</b>	effects of the Data Protection Act on users and operators of information processing systems are identified and explained
<b>5</b>	effects of computer technology on users and operators is identified
<b>Range:</b>	<b>Purposes:</b> storing information, distributing information, using information, communicating information  <b>Information processing systems:</b> manual, electronic  <b>Evaluation criteria:</b> security, efficiency, cost-effectiveness  <b>Data Protection Act:</b> individual rights, access to information, security, ownership  <b>Effects of technology:</b> speed, accuracy, costs, health, skills, access to information
<b>Evidence indicators:</b> Examples of information processing systems used by a business organisation illustrating the purposes of the systems and the effects of legislation and changing technology on users and operators. Evidence should demonstrate understanding of the implications of the range dimensions in relation to the element. The unit test will confirm the candidate’s coverage of range. (NCVQ 1993b p. 9)	

The Element 2.3 was briefer than Outcome 7.3 which it effectively replaced and was potentially more open to a wider interpretation than the focus on “administrative procedures and systems”. The performance criteria and statements of range brought in the Data Protection Act (highlighting individual rights and access to information), and made specific reference to the “effects of computer technology, though this was limited to “users and operators”.

With the publication of Generation 5 in 1995 (NCVQ 1995a) the above had been amended and incorporated into a unit titled *Business Organisations and Systems* (as Element 2.4). The format had been substantially supplemented by the addition of “amplification” and “guidance”:

**[see over]**



<p><b>Element 2.4: Analyse information processing in a business organisation</b></p> <p><b>PERFORMANCE CRITERIA</b>  <b>A student must:</b>  1 explain the purposes of information processing  2 describe information processing in the business organisation  3 analyse the effectiveness of information processing in one business organisation  4 explain the effects of the Data Processing Act on individuals and business</p> <p><b>RANGE</b>  <b>Purposes:</b> receiving information, storing information, using information, communicating information</p> <p><b>Information processing:</b> manual; single-purpose systems (word processing, number processing, spreadsheets, databases, graphics processing); multi-purpose systems</p> <p><b>Analyse</b> in terms of: fitness for purpose, cost and value for money, efficiency, information retention, security</p> <p><b>Effects of Data Protection Act:</b> on individuals (access to information, security, ownership, accuracy); on business (ability to sell information to others, cost of meeting the Act)</p> <p><b>EVIDENCE INDICATORS</b>  A report which explains the purposes and effectiveness of information processing in business organisations and describes the systems used for processing numbers, text and graphics in one organisation.  The report should include:  an account which illustrates the effects of the Data Protection Act on the individual's rights to personal access to information, the security of that information and the accuracy of the information held by the organisation about the individual.[NCVQ (1995a p.] 26)</p>	<p><b>AMPLIFICATION</b>  <b>Multi-purpose systems (PC1 to PC4 range)</b> those systems capable of operating several tasks at the same time. Students should know that such systems exist and understand that they greatly increase work opportunities for staff. However, they should be aware of the training implications.</p> <p><b>Analyse (PC3)</b> after collecting data on the information processing system in one business organisation students interpret it, and draw conclusions from it, remembering that the information may be either subjective or objective.</p> <p><b>Efficiency (PC3 range)</b> includes consideration of the time taken, speed, volume of work and ease of use.</p> <p><b>Effects of the Data Protection Act (PC4)</b> positive effects for businesses could include the accuracy of information held and the ability to earn money by selling information to others; one positive effect for the individual could be personal data disclosure on request. Negative effects for businesses could include the expense of meeting the requirement of the Act; for example, the need to employ a data protection officer, and the time taken to oversee additions, deletions and use of information. Negative effects for the individual could include the receipt of unsolicited communications from companies who have purchased personal details, and the storing of incorrect data about the individual.</p> <p><b>GUIDANCE</b>  This element should be seen in the context of the current 'information revolution'. In these times of rapid change, it is important that students have an awareness of how information technology is opening up access to information in new ways. It is equally important for students to understand that businesses are rapidly changing their approaches to information processing to make the most of the information technology now available to them.</p>
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Although the guidance notes advise that the element should be seen in the context of the “information revolution” the performance criteria, statements of range, evidence indicators, amplification and, indeed, the guidance itself betray a conception of information processing issues which is business fixated and generally unable to conceptualise problems other than those which might affect either businesses or individuals. A related element in the same unit, 2.3 “Analyse communication in a business organisation”, illustrates the same narrowness with the guidance notes suggesting that “Students should appreciate that a lack of access to communications can result in a divided organisation where some people are ‘in the know’ and others are not.” (NCVQ 1995 p. 25). Only in the unit *Production and Employment in the Economy* is there a semblance of recognition of societal factors when, in relation to Element 5.2 “Investigate and Evaluate Employment”, there is specific mention of unemployment and its effects on the unemployed and on communities. In relation to the unemployed the amplification notes suggest that “...their skills and knowledge may dissipate incurring costs. Their potential income and output is lost to the economy.” (ibid. p. 38). The unalloyed economic instrumentality of this is transparent and underlines Bloomer’s (1998) point that alongside the progressivism of GNVQs there is a strong measure of technical rationalism. It was almost as if the societal repercussions of information technology, or of business activity itself, did not exist.



The above examples of the treatment of one specific part of the BEC/BTEC/GNVQ curriculum illustrate a train of thinking about content and information which is broadly representative of the way in which the “appearance” and language of the courses as a whole has changed over two decades. The transition to GNVQ brought with it what Bloomer (1998) has identified as a “strong classification” of knowledge despite the rhetoric of integration. This rhetoric was a legacy of the real integration opportunities which were evident in Generations 1 and 2 of the BTEC National. Business opportunities and problems are clearly highlighted throughout the various versions of the curriculum, and latterly “personal” issues such as those around data protection are identified. There is, however, a clear failure to appropriately highlight societal issues such as unemployment, deskilling, the restructuring of the work, surveillance and information overload. To date vocational education and training in England has failed to encapsulate oppositional perspectives or even to be properly critical of its subject. In the end it may well be this absence of a proper consideration of the social context of business which, above all else, damages the progress of the vocational curriculum.

Criticisms of the behavioural objectives model, and particularly those made by Stenhouse (1975), are well known. Pearce (1978), who had been directly involved in the writing of BEC modules, argued that BEC had sought to avoid the behaviourist approach. It would be argued, however, that the curriculum had not been successful in avoiding the difficulties associated with it (Mace 1980). The model of competence promoted by NCVQ is unquestionably



behaviouristic, underpinned by logical positivism and harnessed to a raw functional analysis of job roles in a manner which, it has been suggested, is unsuited to the needs of mainstream further education (Marshall 1991; Hyland 1993; Jones and Moore 1993). It is also at odds with the experiential learning which has been seen as the most influential model in the further education sector (Hyland 1994b). Ashworth (1992) argues that the NCVQ conception of competence is based on a strictly behavioural analysis and that consequently it neglects the centrality to being competent of knowledge and understanding, placing the focus too strongly on personal competence and ignoring the importance of teamwork. Hodkinson (1992) has outlined an interactive view of competence, which following the symbolic interactionism of George Herbert Mead sees reality as something created rather than given. For Hodkinson the concept of competence is capable of rescue. Bridges (1996), whilst broadly agreeing with the attack made on competence by Hyland (1993) in so far as it applied to the NCVQ model, argued that the concept itself, with its “transparency of expectations”, should not be entirely dismissed on the basis of a critique of its weakest manifestation. Hyland (1997) responded to this intervention by suggesting that all competence strategies are intrinsically behaviourist, concerned with the assessment of performance and thereby “...underpinned...by technicist and managerialist assumptions...” (p. 492). This should perhaps come as no surprise in relation to a curriculum which, after all, was specifically designed to meet the needs of business in the context of what was an uncompromisingly capitalist economy in a political climate of radical conservatism

## **The Evolution of Skills**

The FEU (1979) report *A Basis for Choice* was instrumental in placing the issue of skills development at the centre of debates about the vocational curriculum, specifically calling for transferable skills. It proved to be hugely influential. Despite this, BTEC's 1984 consultation exercise had suggested little enthusiasm for the realities of attempting to develop transferable skills. It was stated, for example, that "...many felt that there was a need for considerable research in this area, and also a requirement for significant staff development before implementation could be realised" (BTEC 1984b p. 8). Notwithstanding this reticence, some fourteen months later BTEC published its latest course specification (BTEC 1985a) complete with details of the eight Skill Areas which the Council expected centres to develop in their students.

These were as follows:

- a learning and studying;
- b working with others;
- c communicating;
- d numeracy;
- e information gathering;
- f information processing;
- g identifying and tackling problems;
- h design and visual discrimination.

In many ways the skills initiative undertaken by BTEC was, in the circumstances of a potentially hostile response in the colleges, a courageous one. It was, however, a rational and prescient response to what some,

amongst whom was Lyotard (1984), were now recognising as a gathering crisis of knowledge. The way in which BTEC conceptualised the skills required was also, relative to the curriculum objectives, quite visionary. One of the stated aims of the skills was "...to ensure that students develop the ability to undertake the kinds of tasks they will encounter at work, in their communities and in their private lives." (BTEC 1985a p. 21). Each of the eight skill areas had a detailed statement of between five to ten specific skills which were associated with it (see BTEC 1985a pp. 24-25). To show their earnestness about skills BTEC required centres to record a grade for skills attainment at the end of each of the two years of the course. Assignments were duly written which explicitly attempted to develop and assess skills. Centres had freedom to agree with their BTEC moderator the precise way in which this would be done. Some devised special skill development activities and assignments, others found ways of integrating skills activities within modular assignments. An element of peer and self assessment was beginning to be introduced specifically with regard to skills (for an account of this in relation to BTEC see Fisher 1991).

In 1992 BTEC's Generation 3 saw a further strengthening of skills. BTEC (1992e) published detailed guidance including a range of possible implementation strategies, suggested learning activities, and provided *pro forma* documentation for student skill reviews and the recording of student profiles in skills development. The eight skill areas were reduced to seven and amended as follows:

**[see over]**



<b>1985</b>	<b>1992</b>
a learning and studying;	managing and developing self;
b working with others;	working with and relating to others;
c communicating;	communicating;
d numeracy;	applying numeracy;
e information gathering;	[discontinued]
f information processing;	applying technology;
g identifying and tackling problems;	managing tasks and solving problems;
h design and visual discrimination.	applying design and creativity.

A total of 18 skills outcomes were devised and attached to the appropriate skill areas. Of particular interest amongst these, in terms of its affective and ethical implications, was “Treat others’ values, beliefs and opinions with respect” in the area Working With and Relating To Others. Students had to achieve each of the 17 outcomes, including this one in order to receive an award. This was perhaps the first time that a non-advanced further education programme in England had entered such territory and BTEC should be applauded for that. The majority of BTEC’s skill outcomes clearly underline the Althusserian (1971a) thesis that the economy dictates the forms of education, for they are aimed at producing the self-development, self-management and flexibility in the face of change demanded by the new industrial forms of late capitalism. At the same time, they mirror the reductive characteristics of the limiting performativity described by Lyotard (1984).

In 1993 BTEC (1993f), under the aegis of GNVQ, published six Core Skills Units, three of which (Communication, Information Technology, and Application of Number) would be mandatory. Working With Others survived as one of two NCVQ accredited “Additional Core Skills Unit” which would be certificated by BTEC. Treating “others’ values, beliefs and opinions with respect”, however, was not featured as part of the performance criteria. A further core skills unit “Problem Solving” was also made available by BTEC but, because it was unaccredited by NCVQ, it needed to be recorded separately in a record of achievement. By the mid 1990s the concept of Key Skills had been widely accepted and again featured as a mandatory component of the 1995 revision of GNVQs (NCVQ 1995a). Dearing’s (1996) widely respected *Review of Qualifications for 16-19 Year Olds* suggested that the content of the units be harmonised within the proposed “Advanced Supplementary” in Key Skills as a means of forming an area of commonality between GNVQs and the “A’ Level family” (p. 72). It appears that the scheduled September 2000 revised version of GNVQs will see the Key Skills continue as an integral part of GNVQs despite the fact that, for the first time, their achievement will no longer be necessary in order to gain the award (QCA 1999). This is likely to be part of the attempt to gain greater compatibility with GCE A Levels as well as to allow centres to further lighten the assessment load should they so wish.

Hodkinson (1989) identified the emphasis which vocationalism places on personal effectiveness as a possible unifying theme which might help to bridge the academic vocational divide. Arguing that critical thinking is a

concept which should hold equal appeal for both traditional liberal educationalists and the new vocationalists Hodkinson postulates a scenario whereby the promotion of modularity, effective tutorial support, participative learning, and formative assessment across the vocational and academic sectors might reap mutual benefits. Calling specifically for a focus on personal effectiveness, autonomy and co-operation, Hodkinson envisages a real opportunity for radical educators to begin to advance. In many respects the skills model promoted by BTEC in 1985 and revised in 1992 still provides a possible template for such a development.

Ainley and Corbett (1994) have criticised the emphasis on skills in any curriculum as “essentially ambiguous”, representing “...upskilling, reskilling and multi-skilling for some, combined with de-skilling to semi-skilling for the many.” (p. 372). Green (1998) is sceptical that core skills will ever form a bridge between the vocational and academic wings of post-16 education. Locating their development in the historical context of the low status and strongly technical anti-liberal ethos of technical education in England and Wales he argues that core skills constitute “...an inadequate surrogate for continuing general education...” (p. 24).

Halliday (1996a, 1996b and 1998) has sought to interrogate the issue of values in further education and specifically with regard to the vocational curriculum. Locating the tendency for many vocational curricula to seemingly perceive themselves as value free as a consequence of their epistemological roots being in logical empiricism (1996a), roots which have not been obscured



by the attachment of the liberal humanist discourse of empowerment and student-centredness. Halliday (1996b) criticises the way in which the acquisition of knowledge, skills and attitudes is discussed as if they were "...value free and disinterested..." and complains that values education has been "...repackaged variously as 'life skills', 'transferable skills', 'core skills', 'interpersonal skills', 'moral competence', and so on." (p. 72). Hyland (1992), in relation to competence based vocational education, sees the "chief problem" for moral educators as been the "...conceiving of moral development in terms of the satisfaction of pre-specified behavioural outcomes." (p. 146). In a subsequent contribution Hyland (1995a), in proposing the adoption of a Deweyan "Education for Work" programme as part of the 14-19 curriculum for all, bemoans the way in which NCVQ omitted the personal skills core category from the mandatory core units.

### **Assessment and BEC/BTEC**

BEC's *Consultative Document* (BEC 1975) plainly stated that the Council envisaged that its awards would incorporate both a "significant emphasis" on formal time constrained written examinations as well as "adequate recognition" of coursework which would be included in the final assessment. (p. 7). These two points were largely incorporated into the *First Policy Statement* (BEC 1976) as part of the aims of assessment with the addition of statement requiring that assessment must be "...related to the aims of the course as a whole." (p. 16). The Council noted that respondents to its consultation had stressed the need to maintain "unseen" and "open book" time-constrained examinations, to measure various aspects of ability through the use of a range of assessment methods, and the need to measure the ability to "...inter-relate knowledge, skills, and their application in a business

environment..." (p.17). The course specification for BEC's first National level awards (BEC 1977b) duly proclaimed that the assessment framework outlined "...provides for the development of a rigorous in-course assessment while maintaining the importance of written examinations." (p. 10). The way in which the traditional form of examination would gradually whither away in BTEC has been referred to above.

The main provisions for the assessment of Generation 1 were that all the General Objectives of every module had to be assessed by in-course assignments. The double common core module *The Organisation in its Environment* was examined at the end of the second year. The board core modules *Administration in Business* and (depending on the board followed) either *Quantitative and Accounting Methods* or *Accounting 2* were also examined. Each option module had to be assessed by examination. This meant that a BEC National Diploma student would typically face nine examinations, three in options at the end of Year 1, and six at the end of the second year. The format of examinations was largely open to the Centre though the approval of the moderator had to be obtained. Case study based examinations were encouraged, often with the case study itself been issued to students a couple of weeks in advance of a three hour examination. A full and interesting account of the evolution between 1981 and 1983 of an integrated examination for *The Organisation in its Environment* and *Administration in Business*, which was carried out over two days, may be found in Milloy and Saker (1984). The examinations were internally assessed with a sample of scripts seen by the moderator who also considered the overall distribution of results obtained.

For both assignments and examinations there was a strong commitment to criterion-referenced assessment. In the event of a poor performance on an



in-course assignment a student was entitled to repeat the work. BEC Circular 4/77 (BEC 1977c) set out the assessment framework in detail. The grading was as follows:

A	excellent pass	B	very good pass
C	good pass	D	pass
E	marginal fail	F	fail

Being criterion referenced there was no number/percentage conversion scale and staff used to marking on number scales and converting to letter grades had to alter their practice. Employers and others (often HE institutions) asking for percentage marks were frequently *non-plussed* when told that none existed. BEC *Circular 4/77* (BEC 1977c) contained guidance, which sometimes baffled lecturers and moderators alike, on labyrinthine formulas for the compensation of referral grades and the award of overall distinctions.

The publication of guidelines for Generation 2 in 1985 (BTEC 1985a) saw a number of significant reforms. No separate examination grade was required and the very word “examination” disappeared to be replaced by “final assessment”. In practice many of the final assessments now adopted more radical formats, ranging from case studies in advance with open book on the day, to individual and group verbal presentations. Only one final grade was awarded for each unit, with the addition of a grade for skills attainment in each year of the course. The new grading system was as follows:

D	Distinction	M	Merit
P	Pass	R	Referred
F	Fail		



There would be no overall grade for the Diploma and chaos ensued for a few more years as some HE Admission Tutors, having by now (finally) become accustomed to the grading regime associated with Generation 1, continued to make offers in terms of “Overall Distinction” despite the fact that within the new system this would mean a distinction in every unit. The best efforts of BTEC to publicise the change, and of UCCA/PCAS referees to signal the new system through a standard clause in their references all too often proved inadequate. Many employers were equally confused. This system of grading would survive until 1992.

Generation 3 saw the end of Merit and Distinction grades for individual modules, though these were now made available for the award overall on the basis of a portfolio representing the course as a whole. Lecturers were advised (BTEC 1991a) that “...During the formative processes of a programme, the concepts of ‘pass’ and ‘fail’ are best replaced by “competent and “not yet competent” (p. 20). From an Althusserian (Althusser 1971a) perspective the needs of capital require only this bottom line; can the operative do the job or not? For those engaged in the writing of references for HE, as well as for students themselves, the information that a student was receiving a succession of passes was of little help. Some staff took to keeping a “secret” register record of Merits and Distinctions as a means by which meaningful information might be retained as well as an aid to the task of classifying a not inconsiderable portfolio at the end of the two year course. Even without this, the job of recording a pass against each competence was proving to be a painful administrative experience and the scene was set for

the much criticised assessment regime which would be ushered in by the advent of GNVQ.

GNVQ's (Generation 4) continued the principle of a "pass" only for each unit, based on having shown competence with regard to all the elements. Again an overall Merit or Distinction was available for the production of a portfolio. Two completely new features were introduced. The first of these was the introduction of external tests (one hour multiple choice) for mandatory units. The second was the introduction of Grading Themes. At Advanced Level the three process based grading themes, together with their respective criteria, were as follows:

- Planning;

Criterion 1 - Drawing up plans of action.

Criterion 2 - Monitoring courses of action.

- Information Seeking and Information Handling;

Criterion 3 - Identifying and using sources to obtain information.

Criterion 4 - Establishing the validity of information.

- Evaluation;

Criterion 5 - Evaluating outcomes and alternatives.

Criterion 6 - Justifying particular approaches to tasks/activities.

September 1994 would bring the addition of a fourth outcome based grading theme;

- Quality.

Criterion 7 - Synthesis.

Criterion 8 - Command of 'language'.

NCVQ (1995c)

In order to receive the an overall grade of Merit or Distinction a student's portfolio would need to demonstrate achievement of the appropriate grade in at least one third of the evidence.

As a device through which they could evidence the themes students were continually involved in systematic "Action Planning" which spawned a set of documents which they were required to produce in respect of each assignment. These were generally based on a *pro forma* which had originated from NCVQ and been circulated to colleges. The two sided form required students to complete sections under the following headings:

<b>PROJECT TITLE.....</b>	
<b>PLANNING</b>	
Plan of action to start/complete the project	
	[SPACE]
Developments to the plan of action	
	[SPACE]
Describe any contribution to group work	
	[SPACE]
.....	
[side 2]	
<b>INFORMATION SEEKING AND HANDLING</b>	
What resources did you use need and why? (books, visits, videos, IT, tutors)	
	[SPACE]
<b>EVALUATION</b>	
Was the project successful? What changes and modifications did you make or would you like to have made , and why? What materials, equipment and processes did you use and were they appropriate?	
	{SPACE}
SIGNED	(student)



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Bates (1998b) and Bloomer (1998) have both reported on situations where Action Plans were, in practice, frequently completed by students after and not before work was undertaken. This relentlessly recording was widely regarded as a chore by students who were often, quite understandably, driven to platitudinous forms of insidious self-denunciation by the evaluation process. Bates (1998a and 1998b) found such evaluations to largely consist of “stock formulae”. This is not surprising, firstly because of the unreasonable number of times which students are required to perform evaluations on their work, and secondly because it is common for lecturers to provide exemplars which students, tired of inventing their own clichés are happy to recycle. Since it was these themes on which the grade rested a staffroom myth quickly developed to the effect that a student might gain a distinction through a portfolio of mediocre work just so long as they had evaluated it as such. Here then was Foucauldian self-regulation. The thoughts of the student were to be known and a process of normalisation was in motion.

Generation 5 left this regime intact but storm clouds were gathering as teachers wilted under a heavy burden of recording. Detailed guidance on using the grading themes and other aspects of the assessment system was provided (NCVQ 1994b; BTEC 1995c). The critical *GNVQ Assessment Review* produced by John Capey (NCVQ 1995b) was widely welcomed by college staff but the real benefits of this are unlikely to be felt for a little time yet.

## Strategies of Implementation and the BEC/BTEC Curriculum

BEC, having identified that whilst most employers recognised the need for craft and technician education in science and engineering, were aware that the need for business education was "...not nearly so widely acknowledged." (BEC 1975 p. 2) and that employers attitudes to business education ranged from "...relative enthusiasm to almost total apathy." (BEC 1976) (Foreword). To counteract this BEC urged colleges to strengthen and increase their links with employers and to involve them in the planning of course provision.

Although the *Consultative Document* (BEC 1975) had made no reference to the issue of work experience for full-time BEC students, contenting itself with a statement to the effect that "...simulated business situations should be used where appropriate..." (p. 11), the *First Policy Statement* (1976) went further in stating Council's view that work experience would provide a student with "...greater benefit than the full-time student with no work experience." (p. 11). This was a claim which, despite its strange absence from the *Consultative Document*, had been "strongly supported" (p. 11) by responses to it. As a consequence of this support the Council determined to encourage the devising of courses which would "...incorporate a compulsory work experience component in some form." (BEC 1976) (p. 11), however, recognising the difficulty of organising placements, in the next paragraph the Council announced its decision that "...for the present, no formal requirements for work experience will be compulsory for obtaining a BEC award." (ibid.). *The Initial Guidelines on the Implementation of Policy* (1977) announced a willingness to consider any monitored and assessed work experience element as "...the equivalent of an option module..." (p. 12). Following this extraordinary equivocation the course specification for Generation 1 of BEC (BEC 1977b), in the end, carried no requirement for work experience.



The Generation 2 guidelines (BTEC 1985a) restated the importance of involving employers, suggesting, (with more unrealism than optimism), that they might assist lecturers in the design of assignments through providing ideas and materials, contribute to assessment, and serve on course committees. This latter at least was attainable, but only just. It also suggested that employers might be involved in the provision of work experience placements. Generation 2 strongly prioritised work experience for full-time students, suggesting that where this was not possible then work simulations would be an acceptable alternative. The finding and monitoring of suitable placements placed a considerable burden on many colleges. Huddersfield Technical College, for example, both used the services of a work placement agency and invested money and energy in the creation of a simulated office environment (HTC Archive 1975-95). The college also attempted matching part-time Certificate with full-time Diploma students in a work shadowing arrangement. It was perhaps these real difficulties of implementing work-based learning which led the guidelines to Generation 3 (BTEC 1992a) to stress that “Work-based learning and assessment is not a mandatory requirement...” (p. 11) whilst reiterating the importance of simulations. By this stage many colleges were beginning to use simulations such as the Young Enterprise Scheme. The requirement of BTEC GNVQs (BTEC 1993e) was to label work experience/work shadowing as “...desirable...” and “...recommended wherever possible...” (p. 32), a marked softening of stance on this issue and a belated recognition of the harsh realities of obtaining suitable placements.

The learning potential of work experience within BEC/BTEC was never fully elaborated. Within vocational education and training programmes generally it is typically seen as providing useful experience of work practices, disciplines

and hierarchies, a basis for transition, and a potential for the acquisition of practical knowledge and development of work related skills in a "real context". Radical educationalists have tended to criticise work experience as a process which mystifies capitalist production relations and presents them as something which occur naturally rather than as the product of particular economic and political social structures (Simon 1983). Schilling (1987) has convincingly argued that work experience may well offer a means of developing a critical awareness amongst students and this is something which a vocational curriculum of the future might usefully explore provided that a properly regulated system of placement could be found.

The implementation of Generation 3 (BTEC 1992a) recommended the delivery of the core by a series of "activity blocks". It was argued that these had a number of advantages including the development of time management skills in students, variety which lead to student motivation, and the breaking down of barriers. More to the point, with the provision of an induction block, this practice enabled students to start their studies at various points of the year, thereby facilitating the so-called "roll on-roll off" system. This freed colleges from the tyranny (or sanctuary) of the September start and allowed student hungry institutions, on the dawn of incorporation, to recruit all year round. January intakes became common place.

An aspect of the relationship between BTEC and GCE A Levels which is worth particular consideration is that of concurrent teaching of the two. It has recently been announced (QCA 1999) that the next version of GNVQs (Generation 6) will, by the provision of six and three unit versions aim to encourage mixing with other qualifications "including A Levels". This principle was established by the first GNVQs which, when launched in September 1993, through the notion of "additionality", specifically referred to GCE A

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Levels as one means by which learners may wish to extend their achievements (BTEC 1993e p. 32). This at the time represented something of a *volte face* from what had previously been a strong BEC/BTEC line against its students following concurrent A Level studies. In March 1979 BEC (BEC 1979) wrote to all college Principals and to Chief Education Officers stating that,

Some colleges...are encouraging BEC Diploma students to take additional studies leading to qualifications which have different objectives from those of a BEC course...BEC wishes to draw the attention of principals and college staff to the possibility that indiscriminate encouragement to students enrolled on BEC full-time Diploma courses to take even more study and on a variety of courses could be detrimental to the students' ultimate chances of successfully completing any of the courses. (p. 1)

The archives of one college show that this was still very much an issue in 1983 when there was a "special visit" from BEC Officers to discuss their concerns regarding the established practice of concurrent BEC/A Level teaching at the Centre. The Head of the Business Studies Department was subsequently informed in a letter from BEC dated 16 March 1983 that "...in future publicity for the BEC National Diploma you will avoid linking the course with A Levels..." (HTC Archive 1975-95). There was a strong feeling in the college, based on intimations from BEC Officers, that the validation of the centre might be imperiled if it failed to comply with BEC's policy. The view of the college had been that allowing students to obtain one or two A levels in addition to the BEC National Diploma had been a way to enhance their profile of qualifications and many had met with success in both awards. There was, however, one negative and unanticipated consequence; some HE Admissions Tutors, when faced with an applicant offering both BEC National and two A Levels, had a propensity to make offers based on the A Levels alone or to ask for a strong performance in both.

## Learning Strategies Prescribed by BEC/BTEC

Council's policy emphasises STUDENT achievement. Module specifications focus upon the development of appropriate student learning activity directed towards learning objectives, rather than detailed delineation of subject matter to be put across by the teacher. This does not imply that formal exposition is not an essential prerequisite for much learning, particularly for some topics and some modules. However, such exposition should be limited to its necessary place in the total learning process and, wherever possible, the emphasis should be upon learning activity.

BEC (1977b) (p. 12)

BEC/BTEC revolutionised the rhetoric of pedagogic practice in FE between 1979 and 1985. It was in the first six years, the years of Generation 1, that lecturers were challenged to work co-operatively and to break away from the widespread practice of traditional lecturing. In order to make this a possibility BEC provided a combination of advice about delivery of the curriculum reinforced with monitoring of assignments and programmes. Over the years BEC/BTEC has produced a steady stream of staff development material focusing on the facilitation of student learning through student centred practice, prominent examples include *Teaching and Learning Strategies* (BTEC 1986a), *Assignments Help Students to Learn* (BTEC 1986b), the huge *Teachers Guide* (BTEC 1987), and the copious *Getting GNVQs Right* (BTEC 1995). The fact is that all BEC and BTEC guidelines featured substantial advice on learning and teaching strategies in a way which was previously (and has been subsequently) unprecedented elsewhere. The Council has also been active in providing staff development events both regionally and within colleges. On one level the trend towards working collaboratively, within the framework of a "progressive" curriculum, could be seen as breaking down personal barriers and hierarchies. At the same time this was taking place

within an unprecedented deluge of advice and prescription which was seen by many as eroding their professionalism and independence (see the section *The Further Education College as a Workplace in Transition* in Chapter 4). Individuals were becoming more visible and therefore more governable (Foucault 1991).

The extent to which teachers actually operationalised the ethos of student centred, activity based, learning is not easy to judge. Farrington (1991), not exclusively in relation to BEC/BTEC, has questioned the extent to which student centred learning is really practiced in further education. Throughout the BEC/BTEC years what went on behind the classroom door, by and large, remained impervious. Notwithstanding this, learning materials were easily accessible to moderators and were also placed under the microscope by BEC's system of Annual Reviews. Each Annual Review addressed the issue of student centredness and assignment based activity learning in some degree or other but even at the issue of the *Report to Centres Following BEC's Fifth Annual Review of Standards (1983)* in January 1984 (BTEC 1984d) it was still necessary to state that,

The concept of a course based on 'class teaching' and of teachers presenting information to students for relatively long periods ('lecturing') is not appropriate to an integrated student centred course. (p. 2).

The review went on to suggest that there should be:

- a greater proportion of students' course time spent on carefully prepared and structured student assignments;
- more staff time for feedback to students and diagnosis of individual difficulties;
- allocation of time for a team approach to the design of assignment programmes, assessment strategies and course review;



- overall a different view of the way in which teachers are expected to spend their time. (ibid.)

The extent to which the BEC/BTEC philosophy of student-centredness was operationalised is highly problematic and would certainly vary considerably from centre to centre depending on the particular moderators, Course Co-ordinators, and institutional cultures involved. The strength of the commitment to student-centredness within the curriculum documentation is not in doubt. The connection between the new vocationalism and the ostensibly progressive concept of student-centredness has been usefully debated by Bates and Rowland (1988). What constitutes student-centredness is itself a moot point but most definitions would refer to certain pedagogic techniques (small group work, activity based learning, action learning, and so on). Rowland (Bates and Rowland 1988) argues that student-centredness goes beyond technique to encompass values that place the student's meanings "...at the centre of the curriculum..." (ibid. p. 8). This notion of control of the curriculum resting with the student logically has implications for content as well as method. For Bates (Bates and Rowland 1988) the student-centred paradigm is "...essentially apolitical *until applied in particular contexts*. Its political meaning will derive from the content and values with which it becomes infused once operationalised." (ibid. p. 15) It is on this basis that, for all its progressive rhetoric and practice (to whatever extent), the BEC/BTEC curriculum was one which must be accounted ideologically conservative (on the basis of the discussion outlined in Chapter 3 above).

GNVQs dropped the overt focus on learning strategies in favour of an outcomes approach which was intended to empower by giving complete freedom as to how the outcomes were achieved. In their study of the issue of independent learning in Advanced GNVQs Knight, Helsby and Saunders (1998) argue that the rhetoric of independence surrounding the GNVQ model is not being realised in consequence of the tightly specified outcomes based approach of the unit specifications, leading to a constraining reductionism and atomisation of the content. They also point to the way in which pressures on staff time have mitigated against the face-to-face contact with students which is necessary for counselling and facilitation, finding one institution where “...the 12 hours a week for GNVQ contrasted with the 22 hours a week that had been available for the BTEC National.” (p. 58). In fact the years of the BEC/BTEC curriculum witnessed a general attrition of course contact hours. On 18 October 1983 Heads of Department from five Yorkshire colleges met in Leeds to discuss a joint submission to BEC’s Fourth Annual Review. The report of their meeting included the following references

...the burdens imposed by the BEC schemes are considered still to be too great, particularly in the present climate of financial stringency when more and more staff are asked to operate with diminishing opportunities for remission [from teaching]. This tends to detract from the teacher’s prime role as an educator...a lack of resources has tended to favour the introduction of minimum course hours to the detriment of teaching/learning efficiency. (HTC Archive 1975-1995.)

Bates (1998a) has analysed GNVQ discourse on empowerment together with the way in which the programmes have been operationalised and characterises the related pedagogy as being concerned with a “...project of individualisation and self-responsibilisation.” (p.11), placing students within

an imposed autonomy and casting them in the role of “hunters and gatherers” of information (p. 18). Another contribution by Bates (1998b) describes the way in which the actual practice of independent learning in the Advanced GNVQ can be met by student resistance to the burdens of responsibility which are placed on them. Bloomer (1998) refers to a “treasure hunt” approach to learning in GNVQ where the “...learning to which it contributed might have been a purely receptive learning masked by a rhetoric of ‘experiential learning’.” (p. 172). Helsby, Knight and Saunders (1998), like Bates (1998a and 1998b) and Bloomer (1998), argue that the empowering rhetoric of GNVQ is at odds with the reality. They do, however, see some potential for GNVQ to be developed in such a way as to provide a real self-development opportunity for many learners.

Bloomer (1997) argues that that BTEC’s emphasis on assignment based learning and the development of skills created “...the possibility for the theory-practice relationship to be conceived as dialectical relationship, as theory-in-practice or *praxis*.” (p. 50) Bloomer concedes that, given BTEC’s absence of a unifying theory this may well have arisen out of “...what teachers and students were able to bring to bear upon the process of curriculum making in the absence of incomplete BTEC prescriptions.” (ibid.) GNVQ, Bloomer suggests, removed some of BTEC’s ambiguity and thereby, perhaps, closed some of the space for praxis. Bloomer’s study is the only major published work to fully recognise the significance of BTEC in this particular respect.



## Monitoring/Quality Control Systems and BEC/BTEC

From the beginning BEC's practice was that Higher Level courses, which were generally devised by the Polytechnics, would require validation with BEC providing broad guidelines. To offer General and National courses centres would require only BEC "approval" with validation being necessary only where colleges were to devise their own courses and options within BEC rules. This was not the usual practice at the General (later "First") and National levels. Approvals were normally on a five year basis (BEC 1976) (p. 15). The *First Policy Statement* (1976) announced that In order to maintain a national standard BEC would appoint moderators who would be responsible to the Council for oversight of a group of colleges. College set examinations and marking schemes would need to be approved by the moderator who would also assess marked scripts. In addition to this moderators would act as a source of "advice and help in connection with the conduct of the courses." (p. 18). The Council established a Committee Structure which contained four separate Boards each charged with the responsibility for devising and approving courses within a defined study area. These four were "Business" (B1), "Financial Sector" (B2), "Distribution" (B3), and "Public Administration and Public Sector" (B4).

Obtaining approval as a BEC/BTEC centre required Centres to complete documentation indicating the experience of its staff, the extent and the quality of its physical resources (buildings, library and specialist learning facilities). Would be Centres also had to explain how they intended to operationalise the course (thereby demonstrating an understanding of and commitment to the BEC/BTEC philosophy of student-centred learning). The approval of the appropriate LEA was also required. BEC/BTEC officers would visit the centre

prior to giving approval. The system of Moderation, which with GNVQs would become "Verification", was charged with the task of establishing and maintaining a "national standard" (BEC 1976). The moderators approved assignments and monitored assessments. Their task, however, was a huge undertaking which demanded a combination of sheer hard work and shrewd judgement. The great majority of moderators were experienced college staff who were given part-time contracts with the Council to undertake this work in three colleges (which were normally in the same geographical region). Some moderators were drawn from HE and a small number were recruited from industry. Each college had to be visited by the moderator (usually) three times each year. A "visit" would normally last the best part of a full day and during that time the moderator would normally meet members of the staff team, review samples of work across all the modules and, on occasion, talk to students. Moderators were appointed on an annual basis and worked with particular centres for a limited number of years (normally three) in order to prevent the development of "cosy" relationships. They worked with Lead Moderators and received training. Nevertheless, Horn (1983) suggested that the professional bodies lacked confidence in the system and quoted one experienced moderator to the effect that "...the combined Pooh-Bahian function of assessor, adviser, guide, diplomat and friend of the college is outside of Gilbert and Sullivan something of a novelty." (p. 33). For Carman (1980) the moderator was seen as an external change agent who, using a "power-coercive" strategy, was required to "...initiate BEC courses, using the authority of BEC and their own positions as a source of power, if necessary,

to coerce the client system into meeting the needs of the courses..." (p. 80). This charge was endorsed by Wilson (1983).

The work of moderators was supplemented by the broad based "Annual Reviews" and later by "Assessment Panels" which targeted modules within specific programmes for review. Although impressive systems of quality control were in place, and the quality of moderators was generally high, the task of moderation of a system without external testing (until Generation 4) was immense and this was one of the areas which critics of BEC/BTEC would frequently attack. This was a common theme in opinions obtained in the survey undertaken in association with this study. Examples of this include the following:

*"They [employers] have a higher opinion of BTEC qualifications if they have personal contact with the local college and know about and have confidence in the standards maintained there."*

[A professional body's representative on employers' views of BTEC]

*"The variability of provision and of standards make this [reputation] very difficult to assess."*

[An HE Admission Tutor on BTEC]

*"The weaknesses are the lack of commonality between colleges and within colleges."*

[An FE Lecturer on BTEC's weaknesses]



## Conclusion

...BEC has to ensure that the sheer complexity of the educational system and its professional jargon do not baffle and frustrate the employers. This is a real danger, often underestimated. If we fail to ensure this, it is possible to end up by overstressing the academic element... (BEC 1977a) (p. 1)

...the central role of curriculum development has largely been taken away from BTEC... (Newbould 1993) (p. 8)

The first of the two quotations above, taken from BEC's *Initial Guidelines on the Implementation of Policy*, indicate that at its inception the BEC/BTEC curriculum was conceived as a device by which employers could be given what they wanted. From such unpromising beginnings a great deal was achieved. The characteristics of the curriculum were highly contradictory, "progressive" in pedagogy at a time when the textbooks of capitalist technique were awash with various humanistic social-psychological perspectives on organisations. It was conservative in content but radical in assessment methodologies. Generation 2 of the curriculum, it has been suggested above, offered a basis for further development. The influence of the NCVQ, however, ensured that the technical rationalism which was intrinsic in new vocationalist curricula came to the fore. The resulting Advanced GNVQ represented Lyotardian performativity in its detailed performance criteria and Foucauldian surveillance in its assessment regime. It had been brought about by, in the NCVQ, as good as an example of an actual instrument within an ISA as Althusser could have dreamed of. By supplanting the established programmes of BTEC, RSA, and City and Guilds it achieved instant hegemony within the FE sector.

Before any of BEC's programmes had been implemented, Morris (1977), after analysing the various consultation and policy documents which had been issued, suggested that "...In so far as the BEC policy constitutes an attempt to change curricular practice in the area of non-degree business education, there is nothing in the proposals which will contribute to ensuring BEC's essential aim is implemented." (p. 18). This prognosis proved to be wrong, but on the available evidence, it was not an unreasonable one for him to have made. In a withering attack on BEC Frankling, Rawlings and Craven (1983) argued that the Council was at that time, as a consequence of inadequate moderation and a lack of recent industrial experience amongst teachers, failing to achieve integration of modules at the level of the classroom. They also argued that a failure properly to consult professional bodies had led to serious doubts about BEC from that direction. Both the methodology and the logic of this paper were subsequently attacked by le Roux (1983), who argued that it was still too early to judge the impact of BEC. Now such a judgement can more easily be made. Whether or not BEC/BTEC achieved integration of modules is, however, no longer a fundamental question. Now the curriculum needs to be properly located within the history of post-compulsory education.

In 1990 Hodkinson (1990) suggested that BTEC might best seek to "...distance itself from the NVQ system..." (p. 35), instead looking for closer links with GCE 'A' Levels. Despite the fact that BTEC was subsequently able, under the umbrella of Edexcel, to form an alliance with the University of London Examinations Board it nevertheless proved unable to circumvent the influence invested in NCVQ. Following a national survey of GNVQs

**THESIS CONTAINS**

**VIDEO    CD    DVD    TAPE CASSETTE**



conducted in 1994 which received 316 responses from institutions Hyland and Weller (1996) conclude that on a quantitative basis, the take-up of GNVQs suggested that the programmes were meeting a need. The fact is that these programmes simply took over the position which BEC/BTEC, and to a lesser extent RSA and City and Guilds, had built and established (Yeomans 1998). More GNVQ qualitative issues suggested problems with jargon, assessment criteria, and insufficient focus on learning leading Hyland and Weller (1996) to suggest that "...perhaps it is now time to abandon the approach completely in favour of something like the BTEC or GCSE models of learning objectives and attainments." (p. 42). Although the BTEC National curriculum has, to all intents and purposes, now gone as a major provision for full-time students it could yet form the basis for something better than it was. This, however, would involve a break from the damaging tradition within English vocationalism of eschewing the critical thinking and critical traditions which have generally laid the intellectual foundations of useful, theory producing, and high status knowledge.

## Chapter Seven

### PERCEPTIONS OF BEC/BTEC

A curriculum is more than the intentions of policy makers and educationalists, and more than the documents which set down its content and guide its implementation; it is also something which is experienced in a range of contexts by a multitude of individual actors and groups. Chapter 1 contained a description of the rationale and sampling strategy which informed the distribution of questionnaires to more than a thousand individuals, mostly in late 1993 and the Summer of 1994 (see *Appendix A* for samples of the questionnaires). 381 responses were received. 214 of these were from either BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance students of that time or former BEC/BTEC National Diploma students. A little over half of the respondents were female. *Table 2* on p. 39 provides a statistical summary of categories surveyed and the number of responses received in each category. Given the existence of large national surveys which had been published (Smithers 1991; Smithers and Robinson 1991; Davies 1993) and which provided statistical data on entry qualifications, gender, social class, and ethnicity the questionnaires used in association with this study were primarily designed to provide qualitative evidence regarding the way in which various BEC/BTEC “stakeholders” viewed the awards and, primarily, how they felt others viewed the awards. In addition to this a series of informal and formal interviews were conducted with students and with FE lecturers at colleges in Barnsley, Dewsbury, Huddersfield and Wakefield; with HE tutors; careers advisers; employers; and with BTEC representatives including the Chief Executive John Sellars (see *Appendix C*). The questionnaires yielded a substantial harvest of quantitative and textual data and the whole of this has been presented as an appendix to this study together with brief commentaries (some of which have been incorporated within the body of this chapter) (see *Appendix B*). This chapter will, using data derived from the questionnaires,

attempt to explore aspects of the way in which individuals with experience of BEC/BTEC perceived the courses, or adjudged the way in which others perceived the courses. There is inevitably a reflexive element here. Other sources, in particular extracts from interviews and correspondence between students and higher education institutions, will be used.

Several studies have presented views on BTEC courses. Smithers (1991) incorporated extracts from interviews with BTEC students and HE admissions tutors into his *The Vocational Route into Higher Education*. Bates (1990) and Riseborough (1992) produced richly evocative ethnographic studies concerned, respectively, with BTEC National Fashion Design and BTEC National Catering and Hotel Management students. Both these papers endorse the intensive workload demands which most BTEC courses make on students, and both identify many of those who were members of the groups studied as belonging to upwardly mobile segments of the working or lower middle classes. Avis (1996c), in a paper which discussed, amongst others, part-time BTEC National Certificate in Business and Finance students, refers to the way in which the course "...served to validate work relations and pushed them [BTEC students] in the direction of waged labour, albeit relatively low paid clerical work.", observing that, "An overt process of class formation is apparent here." (p. 38). Whilst part-time students, who usually attend college because their employers require them to, are in some ways different in their orientation towards study they otherwise tend to share the characteristics of full-time students (that is with the exception of ethnicity; discrimination in the labour market pushes ethnic minority students on to full-time courses). Colleges do not generally collect social class origin data, but contact with many successive cohorts of BEC/BTEC Business students strongly suggests that those from middle class origins constitute a minority. In 1992 Davies (1993) conducted telephone interviews with a sample of 398



young people in schools and colleges spread throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland who were in their first year of A Level (264), BTEC National (119), or other appropriate courses. This research showed that, classifying by the father's occupation, 53 per cent of A Level students were from social classes A, B compared to only 34 per cent of BTEC National students; 49 per cent of BTEC National students were from C2, D and E social class backgrounds whilst these groups comprised a mere 18 per cent of A Level students. 11 per cent of A Level students were drawn from ethnic minority backgrounds compared to 24 per cent of BTEC National students. Such evidence strongly confirms that the vocational curriculum *is* a social class issue. Unfashionable Althusserian notions regarding the power of structures to determine the fate of the individual can seem to take on the complexion of common sense in the context of the vocational curriculum in England.

Bloomer's (1997) Leverhulme funded study on curriculum making and "the social conditions of studentship" in post-16 education involved 21 observations of BTEC National/GNVQ classes (8 of which were in business and finance) and 69 of A Level classes. It also incorporated data drawn from 1680 questionnaires (396 of which were completed by BTEC National/GNVQ students). [Bloomer (1996) is a short paper arising out of the same study.] The divide between numbers of BTEC and GNVQ students is not made clear in Bloomer's (1997) study which simply refers to BTEC classes "(some of which were shortly to be designated GNVQ)" (p. 7) and, in any case, Bloomer suggests that

...much of the literature which serves the sector [post-16] is marked by the uncritical use of descriptors such as 'BTEC', 'GNVQ', 'A-level', 'academic', 'vocational', 'theoretical', and 'practical' in accounts of students and learning. Such usage serves only to reify 'types' of course, group, student or activity; it deflects attention from the purpose and experiences of individual students and, by accentuating the significance of normative knowledge of student experience, casts the

student into the role of passive recipient rather than active participant.  
(p. 4)

This is a sensible caution. Descriptors, however, are very powerful and have consequences. Reification exists not only in academic studies but also in lived relationships, where ideas have the capacity to provoke material consequences. There is a sense in which this study is concerned with those kinds of ideologically distorted realities as much as with what lies behind them. Ways of seeing BTEC, by different actors and from a range of perspectives, will be considered below in relation to two key destinations for BEC/BTEC students as they moved on from their courses to pursue their lives/careers; these were, firstly, employment, and secondly, higher education. This will be preceded by a general discussion of the widespread belief that a BTEC student is generally someone who is, academically, second class.

### **BTEC Students: Academically Second Class?**

The market for the Business Education Council [BTEC's main and direct predecessor], whose First Policy Statement I am now introducing, is the central engine room of British industry, commerce and administration. *BEC is not concerned with the limited world of the business school graduate, the brilliant specialist or the outstanding scholar.*

John Bruce Lockhart - the First Chairman of BEC  
(Foreword to BEC 1976) [previously quoted on p. 108  
above; italics not in original]

There is, implicit in the above statement, a presumption that vocational education is not for the "brightest and the best". The widely discussed issue of "parity of esteem" for vocational education in the United Kingdom carries with it some elements of the notion that those who choose vocational programmes often do so because they could not succeed in more traditional "academic courses". Indeed, this feeling is often internalised by the students

themselves. Below are extracts from responses to a questionnaire survey which, as part of this research, was conducted on the issue of attitudes to and perceptions of BTEC programmes:

**[Please note: the category of respondent is indicated in bold font]**

**HE Lecturers**

*'[BTEC] Students [are] generally of low quality, poor exam. results, over-confident.'*

*'[BTEC is] A qualification for those not capable of undertaking A Levels.'*

*'There is now less teacher/student contact hours which I don't think is a good thing for this type of student [BTEC].'*

*'Poor students appear to be obtaining a [BTEC] qualification due to high coursework marks offsetting poor exam performance.'*

A common theme amongst HE lecturers in their views of BEC/BTEC students was that they would not be adept in traditional examinations. There is evidence that many BEC/BTEC students chose the course precisely to avoid examinations, and that many of those who progressed to HE felt ill prepared for them. Work undertaken by Smithers (1991) suggests that the performance of former BEC/BTEC students in HE between 1982-87 was poorer than that of their A Level counterparts, though the category showing the greatest difference was that of "drop out" (see *Tables 12, 13 and 14* on page 278 below). The respective proportions obtaining first class degrees on Business and Management degrees for example was 4 per cent of former A Level students as compared to 3.3 per cent of former BEC/BTEC students. The idea of BEC/BTEC students being "over-confident", or having an unrealistic view of their own abilities was frequently expressed by HE lecturers. Other views on BEC/BTEC included the following:



**FE Lecturers**

*"Weaker students seem to be able to "hide" when it comes to groupwork. Generally a lower quality of student which means the overall standard is lower."*

*"Students [are] more prone to copying."*

**Employer**

*"There is not enough vetting of applicants to these [BTEC] courses."*

**School Teacher**

*"[BTEC] Enables students incapable of achieving A Level to progress into Sixth Form and possibly HE."*

**Careers Advisers**

*"[BTEC is...] A real option for students not quite academic enough or able to go through A Levels."*

*"Still regarded as second best by secondary school staff and advisers - my 16 year old son was very disparaging about fellow pupils going to vocational BTEC courses at the Tech. Universities don't seem to welcome BTEC qualifications - Admissions Tutors don't really understand them. Therefore Careers Advisers not wishing to disadvantage those intending to apply to HE are more likely to suggest A Levels."*

**BTEC National Students**

*"People still look on it [BTEC] as a course for people who can't do A Levels."*

*"Employers may see you [as a BTEC student] as inferior to A Level students."*

The views expressed above reinforce the perception of BEC/BTEC students as inferior to GCE A Level students. Similar views from BTEC National and A Level students may be found in Bloomer (1996). As outlined in Chapter 6, the basic entry requirement which BEC established for its National Level Programmes was 4 GCE 'O' Levels (or equivalent) (BEC 1976), a demand which was similar to that made by many traditional Sixth Forms for candidates seeking entry to GCE 'A' Level courses. The implementation of this in practice was flexible and some provision for exceptional entry at the discretion of the

College Principal was used liberally, partly perhaps owing to the “second chance” ethos of FE, and partly in order to boost course numbers. That this system of “back door” entry was widespread was underlined by the findings of Smithers (1991) who, in a sample of more than 3,000 National Diploma and Certificate students, found that just over half did not meet the 4 ‘O’ Levels or GCSEs at Grades A-C bench mark. Whilst about one in seven of those surveyed by Smithers were legitimately qualified for entry to National level by means of success on BTEC’s First Level award as many as 29.7 per cent of National Diploma, and 36.6 per cent of National Certificate students, appeared to have been admitted “exceptionally” (p. 12). Davies (1993), in the sample of 398 young people, found that whilst 48 per cent of A Level students had 7 or more GCSE passes at grade C or above, this was true for only 8 per cent of BTEC National students. There is little doubt that the BEC/BTEC National Level programmes attracted (and accepted) a relatively high number of learners who had not enjoyed academic success at school. In that respect at least these were those who, in Althusser’s terms, had fallen by the wayside, perhaps to fill “... the posts of small and middle technicians, white collar workers, small and middle executives, petty bourgeois of all kinds.” (Althusser 1971a p. 147). For many BEC/BTEC students in the changed educational and employment market of the 1980s and 1990s, this fate would be realised *after* a sometimes improbable sojourn in higher education.

BTEC, in conjunction with the centres (mainly further education colleges) offering its courses, has regularly monitored destinations of those achieving its awards. This data, however, is available only in broad categories and



inevitably records the first destination after college only. The category “employment” was not differentiated though many first appointments could not reasonably be expected to have been above the level of the ubiquitous “management trainee”. The following table gives a broad indication of first destinations for BTEC National Business and Finance students:

<b>Table 8: First Destinations of BTEC National in Business and Finance Students 1990-1992: [annual figures expressed as percentages]</b>			
	<b>1990</b>	<b>1991</b>	<b>1992</b>
Degree	19	22	27.6
BTEC HND	25	28.9	30.8
Other full-time education	3	5	7
Employment	49	37.9	28.9
Unemployment	7	6.2	5.7

Compiled from BTEC (1991b, 1992c, 1993b)

From the above it can be seen that by 1991 the majority of BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance students were proceeding to higher education, though most of these were joining BTEC Higher Diploma programmes rather than degrees. In 1990 about half had entered directly into employment. Two years later, with higher education beginning to expand and unemployment increasing, this proportion had shrunk to less than one third. There is little doubt BTEC National Diploma students generally had, on entry to their FE courses, inferior academic profiles to those of their GCE A Level counterparts. This was often part of the reason why they were opting for a different mode of study within a markedly different ethos. They were also, by and large, perceived as “less able” rather than “differently able” by their teachers, by HE lecturers, by employers, and by themselves. The section which follows will consider views on BEC/BTEC as a preparation for employment.



## **Vocationally Qualified?: Some Views of BEC/BTEC Business Courses as a "Passport" to Employment**

It takes about ten years for a qualification to become generally known. Industry and commerce have too many other pressing demands on their attention for managers, especially line managers, to keep abreast of educational developments. Even the GCSE, which has been in existence for seven years, is still often referred to as O levels. Only A levels, with 45 years behind them, are common currency.

Dearing (1996) (p. 5)

This section will present and discuss views of the BEC/BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance course as expressed by lecturers, employers, careers advisers, BTEC students, former BTEC students and others in relation to how employers and potential employers rated BTEC qualifications, and how the courses were regarded as a practical preparation for employment. Using data obtained from a questionnaire survey it is apparent that, even after ten years of availability, the courses had failed to develop a strong positive image in relation to the issue of employment (though some comments made suggest that it may have been on the verge of doing so).

The BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance was (very largely) superseded by the Advanced GNVQ in Business in September 1993, having carried the BTEC "brand name" since October 1983. The courses in question had originally been introduced as BEC National awards in 1979. If, as Dearing (1996) asserts, ten years is the time required for a qualification to become generally known, then the BTEC National Diploma had been given an opportunity to establish its reputation. The intention here is to briefly review a number of perspectives on the BTEC National Diploma as an attempt to

consider the nature of the impression that the award was able to make. The name "BTEC" has carried forward with GNVQs, which have certain characteristics of the later version of the BTEC National curriculum, and a small number of BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance courses are still operational (see *Appendix D*). Nevertheless, it has been argued in Chapter 6 above that there is already a sense that the BTEC National Diploma is, within the context of curriculum history, an episode from the past. In December 1995 the merger of BTEC with the University of London Examinations and Assessment Board (ULEAC), a major provider of GCE Advanced Level Awards, was announced. Taken together with Dearing's (ibid.) recommendations for both a renaming of GNVQs as "Applied A Levels" (p. 71), (subsequently implemented and then quickly dropped), and an investigation of the advantages and practicality of a move towards the specification of explicit learning outcomes within GCE A Levels (p. 95), this strongly suggested the existence of a dynamic of convergence within the 16-19 curriculum. It is in this context that the impact of the former BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance is considered.

The reputation of British employers with specific regard to the issue of education and training is not a good one. Pring (1995) notes that Britain's record of youth training does not stand comparison with that of its competitors and that government attempts to change employer attitudes in this respect have not met with any real success (p. 35). Evans (1992) identifies the tradition of *laissez-faire* in British politics, the early success of the British economy, and the "...attitudinal environment in which business and political

decisions are made.” (p. 1) as factors which explain the poor record of industrial training in Britain. For Ainley (1993) the source of the reluctance of British employers to respond to their responsibilities in the area of workforce training can be found in the "...legacy of industrial primacy...". (p. 48) arising from an initial lack of international competition which was subsequently compounded by imperial protectionism. Following Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan's initiation of "The Great Debate" on education by his speech at Ruskin College in October 1976 (Callaghan 1976; Finn 1987) there has been an unbroken political consensus around the notion that education should primarily serve the needs of the economy, and in this sense one of the most important indicators of the general acceptability of a curriculum is the extent to which it is held in high regard by employers. Such a judgement is amplified in the case of specifically vocational provision. The questionnaires distributed in relation to this study requested ratings on a five point scale such as that illustrated below:

**EXAMPLE OF RATING SCALE USED ON QUESTIONNAIRE**

How, in your view, do employers and potential employers generally rate BTEC qualifications? <i>(please circle a number below)</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
v. low	low	OK	high	v. high
ANY COMMENTS:				



Analysis of responses to the question "How, in your view, do employers and potential employers generally rate BTEC qualifications?" produced the following results:

Table 9: "How, in your view, do employers and potential employers generally rate BTEC qualifications?"					
(This question was asked of all respondents)					
Group		Mean Score		SD	
1. Educators (All)		2.99		.80	
FE Lecturers		3.03		.84	
HE Lecturers		2.80		.81	
HE Ad. Tutors		2.75		.72	
Student FE Lecturers		3.09		.86	
School Teachers		3.40		.66	
2. Employment Related (All)		3.25		.86	
Employers		3.21		1.01	
Prof. Body Reps.		3.50		.50	
Careers Advisers		3.13		.33	
3. School Students		3.00		.50	
4. BTEC Students		3.35		.65	
5. Former BTEC Students		3.18		.74	
ALL		3.15		.74	
% Ratings on scale:					
	1 (v. low)	2	3	4	5(v. high)
Educators	2.41	24.10	46.99	25.30	1.20
Emp. Related	4.55	9.09	47.73	34.09	4.55
Sch. Students	0	12.50	75.00	12.50	0
BTEC Students	0	6.67	55.00	35.00	3.33
Former BTEC Students	2.60	10.39	55.84	29.22	1.95
ALL	2.10	2.86	54.86	28.08	2.10

Responses indicated that higher education staff held the most pessimistic view of how employers generally rated BTEC qualifications (their mean score on the five point rating scale used in the questionnaire [of the type illustrated

above] was only 2.80), with professional body representatives providing the highest mean score (3.50). Former BTEC students, who had first hand experience of attempting to market their qualification, gave a mean score of 3.18, whilst BTEC students were more optimistic at 3.35. Employers themselves (mean score 3.21) generally held higher expectations of the reception which BTEC qualifications might receive in the employment market than did HE academics, though opinion amongst employers was more divergent than in other groups with their scores showing a relatively high standard deviation.

Statements made in response to the question **"How, in your view, do employers and potential employers generally rate BTEC qualifications?"**, included the following:

**FE Lecturers**

*"Strong image. Employers have heard of BTEC unlike some other qualifications."*

*"Still viewed as second rate compared to A Level."*

*"[My] Experience as a work placement officer prior to lecturer indicates many still relate to A Levels in business environments."*

**HE Lecturers**

*"I don't think employers fully understand BTEC qualifications, they are still in the era of GCSEs and A Levels."*

*"Some feel [that] BTECs lack rigour. Bad press has affected their reputation."*

**HE Admissions Tutors**

*"In times of recession employers use qualifications as a crude screening device to cut down on the number of applicants. BTEC students lose out."*

*"The qualification is not widely understood.*

*"There is a lack of awareness by employers."*

Most of the above statements underline that a general pessimism was abroad in the education sector regarding the status of BTEC in the employment market. From the broad category "Educators" only school teachers, who tend to be less familiar both with vocational courses and the employment market, scored a higher average rating in response to the scale used than did the employers themselves. Some comments from the "Employment Related" category appear below:

#### **Employers**

*"Its a bit new and has not established itself."*

*"I feel most do not understand how they relate to other qualifications."*

*"Employers who have experience of them rate them highly. Those less used to frequent recruiting may still feel more comfortable with what they see as traditional measures."*

*"[BTEC is rated] Quite low due to very high pass rates which suggests that the course does not stretch students and lacks competitiveness."*

*"The fact that very few students fail BTEC casts some doubt over the credibility of the qualifications."*

#### **Professional Body Representatives**

*"Methods of assessment, emphasis on learning by doing, acquisition of transferable personal skills are all welcomed by employers seeking recruits with a broad based business qualification."*

*"Provide broad based introduction to business disciplines. Not rated by banks as a preparation for professional study."*

#### **Careers Advisers**

*"Not all employers actually know what they are."*

*"Often not heard of them! More familiar with A Level."*



*“Hard to generalise - I think employers appreciate the vocational bias but there is still some snobbery - A Levels seem a more academic option.”*

Despite the view of one professional body representative that employers welcomed the assessment and learning methods associated with BTEC there was evidence that where employers were negative/hostile in their views this was often based on a dislike of the “progressive” pedagogy and modes of assessment which were associated with the courses. High pass rates/low fail rates were mentioned in this context. Some of the statements made above suggest that many employers were not really familiar with BTEC qualifications, this was certainly the view of careers advisers who were ideally placed to know about this. One careers adviser suggested that “Those with past experience of BTEC regard it higher than those without.” The issue of employers lacking knowledge of BEC/BTEC was made by several categories of respondent though a feature was that many former BTEC students expressing this view still gave a score of 3 (“OK”); it is tempting to speculate that, after such a massive investment of time and effort, an element of denial of the facts (or, in psychological terms, “cognitive dissonance”) may have been at work in respect of this. Comments from BTEC and former BTEC students included the following:

**BTEC Students**

*“A lot of employers who I’ve worked with [part-time jobs] aren’t aware of BTEC as a qualification.”*

*“In general BTEC courses keep changing so employers find it hard to accept these changes and therefore don’t know which is best.”*

**Former BTEC Students**

*“Do not think they [employers] are aware of it!”*

*"When employing I would perceive a candidate with A Levels as 'more academic', most employers wouldn't have heard of it [BTEC]."*

*"They do not recognise it as equivalent to A Level - I don't think they know what it is."*

*"For students going into the accountancy profession BTEC, for some employers, is disregarded a qualification - they rely purely on A Levels."*

*"As it is not readily recognised (still!) the students should realise the potential of the course and inform the employer. It depends on the student's ability to elaborate on the potential usefulness. Excellent talking point at interviews."*

*"Depends if the employer rates formal qualifications (A Levels) highly, and if they don't understand BTEC well enough - I have had to explain it at interviews."*

*"From my experience I don't think that BTEC qualifications are still recognised very much. Employers don't even know what BTEC stands for and what standard it is."*

Many of the above responses relate to the "newness" of BTEC qualifications, and it must be borne in mind that these remarks were made in 1993/94, at least ten years after the inception of BTEC and fifteen years after BEC courses were first introduced. One student who stated that he had felt at an advantage compared to GCE A Level students when it came to how employers rated BTEC was unusual in holding that opinion. Many former BTEC students gave the impression that they had had to work to "sell" their vocational qualification to potential employers who often held a preference for the non-work related GCE A Level.

Another employment related question asked was **"How do you rate the BTEC National Course as a practical preparation for employment?"**. A

summary of the scores derived from analysis of responses to the type of rating scale previously illustrated (see page 260 above) is shown in *Table 10* below:

Table 10 - "How do you rate the BTEC National Course as a practical preparation for employment?"			
(This question was asked of all respondents EXCEPT School Students)			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>		<b>SD</b>
1. FE Lecturers	3.1000		.8847
2. HE Lecturers	3.1563		.8839
3. Employers	3.1786		.8630
4. BTEC Students	3.8500		.7524
5. Former BTEC Students	3.5779		.7985
<b>Groups</b>	<b>F ratio</b>	<b>t value</b>	<b>Sig. Level</b>
1 & 2	.018	- .25	n.s.
1 & 3	.073	- .34	n.s.
1 & 4	.742	- 4.27	p.< .01
1 & 5	.001	- 2.95	p.< .01
2 & 3	.019	- .10	n.s.
2 & 4	1.148	- 4.02	p. < .01
2 & 5	.033	- 2.67	p. < .05
3 & 4	1.576	- 3.78	p. < .01
3 & 5	.145	- 2.40	p. < .05
4 & 5	2.169	2.29	p. < .05
Overall	7.5252		
<b>Note:</b> The F ratio is a measure of variance, in general, the higher the F ratio the lower the probability that the result was owing to chance. The t-test is used to compare the mean scores of two groups. A score of less than 5 per cent probability that the differences between groups are due to chance suggests genuine differences in relation to the variable in question. (Burns and Dobson 1981)			

It may seem reasonable to suggest that the creation of "employability" is the *raison d'être* of vocational courses, and certainly the extent to which such courses are rated as effective in relation to the task of preparing participants for the world of work should be regarded as a key indicator of their perceived value. The mean scores obtained from FE lecturers (3.100), HE lecturers (3.1563), employers (3.1786), BTEC students (3.8500) and former BTEC



students (3.5779) were all above the mid-point category (3) on the rating scale used. This suggests that, generally, in each of the populations sampled most respondents were satisfied that the BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance was a course which effectively acted as a practical preparation for employment. The views of FE and HE lecturers in relation to this issue did not differ significantly ( $t$  value .25). This broad agreement was also evident in comparing the views of FE lecturers to those of employers ( $t$  value .34), as well as those of HE Lecturers to employers ( $t$  value .10). The views of lecturers at both levels of the post-compulsory sector, on this issue, concurred with those of employers.

Significant differences of perception arise when the views of current and former BTEC students are compared with those of their teachers and of employers. A comparison of the views of BTEC students and FE lecturers shows a  $t$  value of -4.27, this falls to -3.78 when the comparison is made between BTEC students and employers. Whilst the views of former BTEC students were not quite as positive as those held by students currently undertaking the course (a mean of 3.5779 compared to 3.8500), they were still of interest in the statistically significant contrast arising from a comparison with the opinions of lecturers and employers.

Amongst comments made by individuals from the various categories surveyed in response to the question "How do you rate the BTEC National Course as a practical preparation for employment?" were the following:

[see over]

**FE Lecturers**

*"Improving but still much content is likely to be irrelevant".*

*"Too theoretical".*

*"Students...can obtain a wide range and diversity of skills. I have knowledge of students who have obtained career progress because of the skills obtained."*

**Student FE Lecturers**

*"The students do not have enough 'in-depth' knowledge of any specialist area."*

*"Needs greater realism to business in course content. I feel it is important for staff [teaching] to undergo specific training in this area."*

The above comments hint at the tension between the twin goals of preparing students for the practicalities of the workplace and preparing them for the demands of higher education. Although the initial ethos of BEC was clearly orientated more towards preparation for employment than HE (BEC 1976) the importance of preparation for HE was quickly realised and BTEC, unlike GCE A Level, attempted to do both these things simultaneously. Many employers, and those in employment related professions, concurred with the perhaps surprising view of an FE lecturer quoted above that the courses were "too theoretical". It seems that many employers would prefer to recruit the products of an academic education but then to ensure that subsequent staff development is highly functional. One employer expressed a clear preference over BTEC National for the strictly competence based NVQs, another preferred GCEs where employees would be going on to professional examinations stating that otherwise the "nature of the work" meant that little difference in performance was apparent. This and a complaint that the "...broad based content..." of the BTEC was "...not always appropriate for employment..." underline that the principles of what Lyotard (1984) called

performativity are deeply ingrained. Some of the comments below illustrate the instrumental mentality which many employers exhibit in relation to training:

### **Employers**

*"[The] Broad based content of [the BTEC] course [is] not always appropriate for employment also specific skills such as keyboarding missing."*

*"The new learning methods are not well liked by the majority of our employees [this comment was clearly focused on the part-time National Certificate courses]. There appears to be an uncertainty in terms of what is expected of them, probably due to the dramatic difference from methods used in school. These new methods mean that it is easier for lecturers to abdicate their responsibilities to support learners."*

*"We prefer A Levels for ease of understanding what the student actually has gained, plus ease of entry to Institute of Bankers examinations."*

*"My main experience of BTEC courses is in Business Studies. Whilst these courses enjoy a fairly good reputation I sometimes wonder if it is deserved. A lot of the subject matter is too general and not specific enough. BTEC have a long way to go to successfully offer these courses to meet NVQ requirements."*

*"BTEC qualifications are worthwhile and a good preparation for work since the syllabi are closely related to the relevant areas of industry and commerce."*

### **Careers Advisers**

*"Varies according to the delivery (pressures on FE colleges and staff), but no concerns over course content - a very practical preparation for employment."*

*"The Information Technology input in BTEC Nationals seems to be welcomed in the workplace, but students still have difficulty transferring their knowledge when in employment - you rarely get students who say 'yes' I learnt how to do that at college' - even though they probably did."*

The views of BTEC and former BTEC students were, as the statistical analysis in *Table 10* above indicates, generally more favourable than other



categories of respondent with regard to their estimation of the extent to which their chosen course would prepare them for employment. The opinions expressed, however, were more mixed than the rating scale scores might suggest and some examples of negative views are provided below:

**Former BTEC Students**

*"Fine for general preparation - not enough practical experience (i.e. what it is really like out here)."*

*"It [BTEC] would only be useful to a lecturer in Business Studies who has never worked in industry or commerce - useless to me."*

*"No basic requirements are provided (e.g. filing, typing, switchboard etc.). We are influenced by the education departments, and yourselves [colleges], into believing that when we go out into the big bad world of employment our BTEC will make us more employable (better than other applicants), well you're WRONG!! The employer would rather have an 18 year old who has been working since school, someone who can walk straight into the job and who they don't HAVE TO TRAIN."*

In contrast to the view expressed above another former BEC student felt that,

*"It was an excellent course with all the principles of business covered. When given the opportunity to discuss what the course covered and in what depth business people are often quite surprised how relevant my studies were and how prepared I am for employment in this field [Marketing] as a result."*

It is tempting to speculate that the relatively high regard which most students with experience of BTEC hold for their chosen course as a practical preparation for employment may be, in part, a consequence of the fact that both BTEC and colleges frequently market the courses on the strength of their practicality and of their direct applicability to business. Some of the comments made by BTEC students contrasted their chosen course to the alternative of A Levels. One stated that "They [BTEC courses] are better than A Levels as they prepare you for real life experiences.", whilst another claimed that "[BTEC courses]...give you better practical qualifications for a

working environment than A Levels.". This preoccupation with GCE A levels was evident in a large number of responses made by former BTEC students. Not untypical were the assertions that "The BTEC course, I believe, gives an insight into what actually goes on in a business, whereas A Levels just concentrate on academic studies.", and "[BTEC] Gives a better insight into the 'Business World' than A Levels.". It is probable that despite the fact that most former BTEC students maintain a high regard for the practicality and employment related qualities of their qualification, their experience of employment and the views which they encounter in the labour market, in some cases, moderate their enthusiasm. One former BTEC student wrote that "The broad introduction to Business subjects has proved very useful, however, this must be qualified by employers not looking past higher qualifications/A Levels.". Those students who were in a phase of BTEC where work experience was not provided, that is those who enrolled on the courses before September 1986, seem to regard the absence of the opportunity for them to have a work placement as a weakness.

The available evidence suggests that the courses provided by BEC, and then BTEC, for those in the "...central engine room of British industry, commerce and administration..." (BEC 1976) were subject to a degree of ambivalence from those "on the bridge" who made decisions about recruitment. It is plain that amongst a great many employers there was a high level of ignorance about exactly what BEC/BTEC was. Whilst many employers welcomed the practicality and business focus which former BEC/BTEC students promised to bring, others clung to more traditional images of what a good education might

provide. It was sometimes considered by employers that BEC/BTEC would be fine, perhaps, for those not aiming for professional status. Many employers felt that the next generation of managers, accountants, solicitors and bankers would need “something better” than BEC/BTEC to prepare them for the rigours of professional examinations.

### **Opening the Door?: Some Views of BEC/BTEC Business Courses as a "Passport" to Higher Education**

The NCVQ consultation exercise on GNVQ conducted in late 1991 (NCVQ 1992) expressed strong support from colleges for GNVQ “...provided that it closely followed the model of the BTEC National.” (p. 44). This was not surprising for two reasons. Firstly, on the basis that a by now dispirited FE sector had learned to automatically support every new initiative as a means of demonstrating its responsiveness to the needs of “the economy”. Secondly, because after years of working to gain recognition and acceptance in HE for their BEC/BTEC students college staff were reluctant to start again from scratch. A national survey undertaken by Christie, Jarvis, Lloyd, Scott, and Skelt (1991) during late 1990/early 1991 showed that the BTEC National was (officially) acceptable for entry to 97 per cent of University degrees. Indeed, in 1989 BTEC had been able to proudly announce that “...all universities now recognise BTEC for matriculation purposes.” (BTEC 1989 p. 33), but this was with the important *caveat* that the situation could vary for individual degree courses and might change from year to year. Just four years earlier the situation had forced BTEC into the somewhat obfuscating statement that an



“...increasing number of universities have formally recognised BTEC awards...” (BTEC 1985c p. 37). The truth was that BEC/BTEC applicants had often had to apply in the vain hope that their UCCA/PCAS form, as a BEC/BTEC application, would be fortunate enough to receive consideration from a sympathetic and kindly admissions tutor. Whatever the officially stated policy of a university/polytechnic might be, and they were increasingly adopting the rhetoric of inclusiveness, the “acid test” would generally turn on the opinions/prejudices of an individual admission tutor (extracts from correspondence with some appear below).

Staff in many colleges, monitoring offers and rejections received by their students, would keep a record of HE departments with a propensity to automatically reject BTEC applicants and those which were inclined to make offers. This enabled subsequent cohorts to be steered away from the “anti-BTEC departments”. Advice to colleges from BTEC recommended this kind of “intelligence building” procedure to staff advising BTEC applicants to HE (BTEC 1993g), but this was not a science and a change of admissions tutor could herald a change in attitude (positively or negatively). Neither were the patterns which these records revealed always predictable. One polytechnic Law department was resolutely anti-BTEC during the late 1980s, whilst the highly rated Law department at the prestigious redbrick university in the same city was prepared to make offers to and accept a steady stream of BTEC students. A report produced for the Training Agency by Fulton and Ellwood (1989) stated that Law and Business Studies departments were “...experiencing an enormous boom...” but that “...it was mainly the public

sector [polytechnic] departments who admitted substantial numbers of BTEC candidates (from 20 to 40 per cent [of their cohorts])." (p. 10).

During 1989, feeling anxious regarding the question of which HE institutions they might apply to, a BTEC student and a mature student who was then following a "return to study" course, wrote to a number of university and polytechnic departments in order to find out their attitudes/policies towards BTEC applicants. Each acted independently of the other and on their own initiative. Included in the sometimes surprisingly candid replies which they received were the following comments:

I have attended seminars arranged by the BTEC people but remain unconvinced that there is any comparability between A Levels and BTEC units. A Levels are (mostly) designed with university entrance in mind, whereas BTEC ND and HND is designed as an end in itself...I believe the chief difficulty is that BTEC teaching is more empirical than that for A levels. The consequence is that BTEC syllabus may appear to cover a similar range of subjects, but the students are not well prepared for the rigours of a university course.

(From an Admissions Tutor at a "redbrick" university)

Dear Mr. X, I am writing in reply to your letter of 14th March in which you ask for details of admissions to this University by BTEC qualifications. I am afraid that I can be of very little help to you, since our experience of considering applicants with BTEC qualifications is practically nil...It seems likely that knowledge of the standard usually required to obtain a place at XXXX is a deterrent to BTEC candidates considering XXXX as one of their universities.

(From an Admissions Tutor at an elite "ancient" university)

The high demand for places and the consequent high grades required at A level are not matched by students of the BTEC. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that anyone who has studied BTEC and feels they are equivalent in ability to A level candidates should spend a year, perhaps, brushing-up on the A level syllabuses and then demonstrate their ability by examination.

(From an Admissions Tutor at a "redbrick" university)



We are increasingly reluctant to accept BTEC students because of the difference in modes of assessment in degree and BTEC courses.  
(From an Admissions Tutor at a polytechnic)

[All the above are extracts from private correspondence between admission tutors and students during 1989.  
(HTC 1975-95 BEC/BTEC Archive)]

In one case three BTEC National students who collectively attended a local authority Careers Advisory Service and expressed an interest in reading Law at a university were advised to "...do a degree in something like sociology at somewhere like Bradford and Ilkley College and then apply to a Law degree..."; advice which was both extreme and ill-formed and which resulted in a formal written complaint being made by their college (HTC 1975-95 BEC/BTEC Archive). Such incidents, however isolated and atypical, dramatically reflect the possibility of BTEC students being made to feel that their Diploma might not be everything which the pre-course publicity had suggested it would be.

Fisher (1990), having tracked two second year cohorts (1988-89 and 1989-90) of the BTEC National in Business and Finance at a large Technical College, illustrated the differential level of competition in four of the main Business related subjects by means of the following table:

[see over]



<b>Table 11: Offers and Rejections Received by BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance students by Four Key Business Related Subjects</b>					
	<b>No. of apps.</b>	<b>Offers (%)</b>		<b>Rejections (%)</b>	
<b>Accounting</b>	58	26	(45)	32	(55)
<b>Business Studies</b>	288	120	(42)	168	(58)
<b>Economics</b>	29	17	(59)	12	(41)
<b>Law</b>	174	48	(28)	126	(72)

The above table clearly suggests that in order to maximise their chance of acceptance in HE in the late 1980s a BTEC student would have been best advised to avoid the traditionally conservative Law departments and focus on the Economics degrees which were, at that time, finding difficulty in recruiting to targets. The 1988-89 year 2 group consisted of 60 students, 42 of whom applied for entry to higher education. A proportion of these were making highly speculative applications and some eventually accepted offers of employment and therefore did not proceed to HE. 27 (64 per cent) of those who originally applied obtained places on the following basis:

- 8 on University degree courses
- 9 on polytechnic degree courses
- 10 on HND courses

National statistics (ibid.) indicate that in 1987-88 BTEC applications to the *Polytechnic Central Admissions System* (PCAS) constituted 8.6 per cent of the total received, whilst BTEC students accounted for 10.5 per cent of those admitted. This contrasts to A Level students having accounted for 80.3 per cent of applications and 69.5 per cent of admissions. *Prima facie* this appears

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to be quite favourable for BTEC students but it should be noted that 15.5 per cent of the BTEC applicants held qualifications at the Higher National level (now NVQ 4). In the same year BTEC students accounted for 4.5 per cent of applications received by the *Universities Central Council on Admissions* (UCCA) and 4.0 per cent of those admitted to the universities overall.

Evidence of the academic performance of those BEC/BTEC students who opted for and were accepted by universities once they arrived on campus was gathered by Smithers (1991) and appears in *Tables 12, 13 and 14* below (all adapted from Smithers 1991):

**[see over]**



<b>Table 12: Performance on Selected University Degree Courses 1982-87</b>							
	<b>Degree Class</b>						
	<b>1</b>	<b>2i</b>	<b>2ii</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Fail</b>	<b>Drop Out</b>
<b>Vocational Qualifications (n = 3371)</b>	6.6	24.2	31.9	10.0	8.6	1.6	17.1
<b>A Levels (n=70112)</b>	7.4	36.0	36.6	8.1	4.1	0.8	7.0
<b>[the numbers in each category are expressed as a percentage]</b>							

<b>Table 13: Performance on Business and Management Studies University Degree Courses 1982-87</b>							
	<b>Degree Class</b>						
	<b>1</b>	<b>2i</b>	<b>2ii</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Fail</b>	<b>Drop Out</b>
<b>Vocational Qualifications (n = 423)</b>	3.3	29.1	40.4	5.7	6.9	0.7	13.9
<b>A Levels (n=5480)</b>	4.0	39.0	42.2	4.5	3.0	0.7	6.6
<b>[the numbers in each category are expressed as a percentage]</b>							

<b>Table 14: Performance on Law University Degree Courses 1982-87</b>							
	<b>Degree Class</b>						
	<b>1</b>	<b>2i</b>	<b>2ii</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>Other</b>	<b>Fail</b>	<b>Drop Out</b>
<b>Vocational Qualifications (n = 336)</b>	2.4	26.8	37.8	6.8	12.2	1.8	12.2
<b>A Levels (n=15301)</b>	4.0	42.2	43.6	3.95	1.8	0.4	4.0
<b>[the numbers in each category are expressed as a percentage]</b>							

The above tables all indicate a significantly better performance by former GCE A Level students in comparison to their BEC/BTEC counterparts, and especially so at the 2i/2ii divide. Overall the numbers of first class and third class degrees awarded were broadly comparable, with former GCE A Level students performing marginally better the former BEC/BTEC students. The

remarkable statistics in these tables are those relating to “drop out” where students from BEC/BTEC backgrounds were shown to be far more likely to leave university without completing their studies than were their former A Level contemporaries. There is every possibility, given the prevailing ethos in many university departments at that time, that this would have had as much to do with unfamiliar modes of study (predominantly lecturing/note-taking/essay writing) and a culture of academic snobbery as much as with “innate” intellectual qualities.

*Table 15* below summarises an analysis of responses to the question "**How do you think staff in higher education generally regard the BTEC National qualifications?**" on a five point rating scale of the type shown on page 260 above:

**[see over]**

Table 15: "How do you think staff in higher education generally regard the BTEC National qualifications?"		
(This question was asked of EMPLOYERS, PROFESSIONAL BODY REPRESENTATIVES, CAREERS ADVISERS, SCHOOL STUDENTS, BTEC STUDENTS and FORMER BTEC STUDENTS)		
(See Table 16 below for the views of FE staff, HE Staff, HE Admissions Tutors, Student FE Teachers and School Teachers)		
Group	Mean Score	SD
2. Employment Related (All)	2.93	.72
Employers	2.89	.77
Prof. Body Reps.	3.13	.78
Careers Advisers	2.88	.33
3. School Students	2.95	.71
4. BTEC Students	3.52	.70
5. Former BTEC Students	3.20	.74

Table 16 below summarises responses to the question "How do you think staff in your institution generally regard the BTEC National qualifications?" using the same type of five point rating scale as was used in relation to the previous question:

Table 16: "How do you think staff in your institution generally regard the BTEC National qualifications?"		
(This question was asked only of EDUCATORS i.e. FE Lecturers, HE Lecturers, HE Admission Tutors, Student FE Lecturers and School Teachers)		
Group	Mean Score	SD
1. Educators (All)	2.90	.94
FE Lecturers	3.30	.78
HE Lecturers	2.05	.74
HE Ad. Tutors	2.83	.55
Student FE Lecturers	3.36	.77
School Teachers	3.00	1.10

It is important to consider *Tables 15* and *16* alongside each other. The greatest statistical contrast is derived from a comparison of the mean score from BTEC students (3.52) [in *Table 15*] and that from HE lecturers (2.05) [in *Table 16*]. This suggests the strong probability of a considerable mismatch of



perception when these two groups eventually met in HE. Higher education Admissions Tutors, who were likely to be better informed regarding BTEC National than the average HE lecturer, showed a mean score of 2.83. The notion that BTEC courses are not properly understood by HE staff, as with employers, suggests itself. BTEC certainly recognised this possibility stating that, as a consequence of a survey of Business Studies tutors in FE, "Some college staff felt admissions tutors do not appreciate [the] nature of BTEC National programmes..." (BTEC 1993g p. 15). It is likely, perhaps, that many HE staff would claim that they understood the courses only too well, for strong views about BTEC were often expressed by them.

Examples of some of the additional comments made by employers, professional body representatives, careers advisers, BTEC National students, and former BTEC National students in response to the question "How do you think staff in higher education generally regard the BTEC National qualifications?", by category of respondent, included the following:

**Employer**

*"[Their views are...] Very variable, especially on those courses which traditionally use A Level."*

**Professional Body Representatives**

*"[Poor] This is due to the low performance of BTEC National students. Also lack of knowledge on the part of admissions tutors."*

*"Like employers they like to have some idea of the standards pursued at the college concerned."*

*"Still quite a lot of prejudice against BTEC National, especially at the older universities. New universities may be more willing to accept."*

**Careers Advisers**

*"Varies from tutor to tutor - some not very aware of BTEC."*

*"BTECs [are] still not specifically mentioned in University Compendium for many institutions. Not directly comparable to A Level points so have to be negotiated separately."*

*"The new universities seem happier with BTEC than the established ones."*

#### **BTEC National Student**

*"I have a friend who is starting University and others doing BTEC who hope to go into HE. The lecturers at universities prefer A Levels rather than BTEC."*

#### **Former BTEC National Students**

*"[HE staff] Basically see BTEC as a substandard substitute for A Levels."*

*"They [HE staff] do not know what the course is."*

*"Can be variable. Durham University told me to drop BTEC and concentrate on A Levels."*

*"Younger staff appreciate it more than older more traditional tutors. Although it is beginning to be valued due to changes in educational policy."*

*"I think they tend to view BTEC less than A Levels in preparing students for revision. However I think they regard BTEC students as good group workers and researchers."*

*"Staff within higher education suffer from a great snobbery of preferring A Level students. BTEC is considered an inferior qualification that is very easily attained."*

*"First of all they think BTEC is just about doing coursework and handing it in on time. Second, they think it is a disadvantage for a BTEC student to follow a degree course because their ability to study towards an exam at the end of the year is very low. I disagree."*

The sense which emerges from statements made is not unexpected, that is that BTEC qualifications suffer in relation to comparisons with the "Gold Standard" of GCE A Levels. Examples of some of the additional comments made by employers, professional body representatives, careers advisers, FE lecturers, HE lecturers, HE Admissions Tutors, and School Teachers in

response to the question "How do you think staff in your institution generally regard the BTEC National qualifications?" appear below:

**FE Lecturer**

*"Better than RSA and C & G."*

**HE Lecturers**

*"Lacks intellectual rigour which A Levels confer."*

*"Not as academically rigorous as A Levels."*

*"Perceptions of staff who have no experience of BTEC are negative."*

**HE Admissions Tutor**

*"Depends on which course the person is on - if HND OK - if degree less enthusiastic."*

**School Teachers**

*"A slow process - raising staff awareness and trying to dispel deep-seated prejudice towards non-academic curriculum. But we are succeeding!"*

*"Most have little knowledge outside the traditional academic routes and are suspicious."*

The divide between HE and FE/schools indicated in *Table 16* above is striking. The overall mean score for all categories of educators of 2.90 is not encouraging for those who seek parity of esteem for vocational qualifications. One HE lecturer referred specifically to "the usual elitism" amongst colleagues; comments made elsewhere (including those in the various categories which follow) suggest that there may well be an element of this behind some HE perceptions of BTEC. *Table 17* below summarises responses to the question "How do you rate the BTEC National Course as a practical preparation for Higher Education studies?" on the five point rating scale of the type shown on page 260:

[see over]



Table 17: "How do you rate the BTEC National Course as a practical preparation for Higher Education studies?"			
(This question was asked of all respondents EXCEPT A Level School Students.)			
Group	Mean Score	SD	
1. FE Lecturers	2.9000	1.0930	
2. HE Lecturers	2.5625	.9817	
3. Employers	2.8929	.8751	
4. BTEC Students	3.8500	.6846	
5. Former BTEC Students	3.6104	.8426	
Groups	F ratio	t value	Sig. Level
1 & 2	.130	1.28	n.s.
1 & 3	1.770	.03	n.s.
1 & 4	8.459	- 5.05	p.< .001
1 & 5	2.597	- 4.01	p.< .01
2 & 3	1.259	- 1.37	n.s.
2 & 4	7.426	- 7.36	p.< .001
2 & 5	1.288	- 6.22	p.< .001
3 & 4	1.137	- 5.58	p.< .001
3 & 5	.349	- 4.12	p.< .01
4 & 5	6.547	1.96	p.< .1
Overall	18.9214		

The question "How do you rate the BTEC National Course as a practical preparation for Higher Education studies?" touches upon what has been seen as an important test of "parity of esteem" for vocational qualifications, that is their acceptability as a passport to a university education. The question "How do you think staff in Higher Education generally regard the BTEC National qualifications?" see *Table 15* on page 280 above) attempted to gain an insight into perceptions of status and of the impressions which individuals might hold regarding what others think. In this case the concern was to directly enquire as to the respondent's view in relation to the pragmatic issue of preparation for HE. The results obtained show a clear though not major disparity between

the views of current BTEC and former BEC/BTEC students who had usually progressed to HE and had direct experience (with mean scores on the 5 point rating scale of 3.8500 and 3.6104 respectively), and those of FE Lecturers (2.9000), HE Lecturers (2.5625), and Employers (2.8929). The pattern discerned was one where a relatively high opinion of the value of their studies as a preparation for HE was found amongst those who followed BTEC courses, as opposed to a markedly less than enthusiastic assessment from their teachers and potential employers.

Examples of some of the additional comments made, by category of respondent, to the question **"How do you rate the BTEC National Course as a practical preparation for Higher Education studies?"** included the following:

**FE Lecturers**

*"...lack of essay writing skills and formal research emphasis."*

*"...depends on the grade obtained - a pass on the BTEC course is not equivalent to 2 A Levels - I can make comparisons because I teach on both courses."*

**HE Lecturers**

*"Failure to incorporate enough examination preparation/assessment is not an adequate preparation for what is to come."*

*"Students generally of low quality, poor exam results, over-confident."*

*"Good for practical work but poor for more academic aspects e.g. critical analysis."*

*"Such students most often apply themselves less well than A Level students but there have been some notable exceptions."*

**HE Admission Tutors**

*"Vocational emphasis tends to weaken focus on academic rigour."*

*"Higher Education still prefers A Levels. A Levels are nationally comparable, BTEC qualifications vary according to institution."*

*"Students only taken with high grades (i.e. Distinctions and Merits), but are variable - some have problems with examinations."*

*"A Level students perform much better on both degree and HND courses."*

### **School Teacher**

*"You can build in academic rigour, which the course did not really prescribe, in training students."*

### **Employers**

*"Fine for BTEC Higher - unsure about degree courses due to different emphasis."*

*"Very high in a directly related field though Maths requirements in some courses demands additional work in this area."*

### **Professional Body Representative**

*"Depends on HE course. BTEC National not so good for preparing for academic degrees, but fine for vocational degrees, especially those developed by the former polytechnics."*

### **Careers Adviser**

*"Emphasis on project work, presentations and communication skills would seem a good grounding for many courses and future employment. Some courses, however, may have less opportunities for continuous assessment and team projects - may be difficult for BTEC students to adapt."*

### **BTEC National Student**

*"I will feel inferior to the people who have successfully completed A Levels."*

### **Former BTEC Students**

*"It doesn't provide experience of in-depth analysis."*

*"I felt much more prepared for my degree course than my fellows with A Levels only."*

*"The Maths on the [BTEC] statistics course is extremely weak and not suitable at all for higher education."*

*"Prepares better for higher level education than staying on at School due to being treated more like an adult."*

*"The only difficulty is adjusting from the continuous assessment of the BTEC to the purely examination based degrees."*



*"Many higher education courses revolve around academic studies (essays etc.). BTEC is better for research and presentations rather than writing findings from books and remembering things."*

*"You are not well prepared for standard 2000 word essay writing in a traditional way and as a consequence I have found this quite hard."*

*"BTEC gives students experience in group work, team building and oral presentations which are important in HE. However, it doesn't really give any useful revision techniques for larger amounts of work which you are faced with at University. The subjects studied at BTEC are very relevant to any higher education business course and I feel through having previous knowledge of computers, Accounting and Marketing I had a good foundation."*

*"I was prepared for the continuous pressure which there was during my Law degree. The BTEC helped because I was used to meeting assignment deadlines. Oral work during the BTEC was valuable because it helped me overcome my shy nature. The BTEC course taught me to be more confident when working with others, I was able to charge when necessary and I could also work effectively alone."*

*"Depends on the course, degrees can be very theoretical which BTEC tends to neglect."*

*"I find that I am more confident in discussions than others due to BTEC, and look at problems with more logical reason than people who have done other qualifications."*

The positive aspects of BTEC provision generally relate to the engendering of independent study skills (one former student remarked that the "Onus on self-help is excellent for University."), presentation skills, and the relatedness of the course content to HE Business Studies programmes. There were concerns, however, regarding the lack of essay writing skills amongst former BTEC students, limited experience of formal examinations, and a perceived absence of "theory" and "rigour". As was the case in relation to the issue of preparation for employment, the "Gold Standard" of GCE A Level loomed large, with many opinions expressed by HE lecturers adding a certain sense

of prescience in relation to the BTEC student who remarked that they would “feel inferior” to former A Level students. There is every indication that such a student would, on entering HE, not only feel inferior but would also often be regarded as inferior to his or her A Level compatriots. There is plenty of evidence that, in terms of the traditional academic measures of formal examination and the ability to write discursive essays, this was likely to be true. An interesting specific issue is that of confidence; a number of BTEC and former BEC/BTEC students mentioned that a benefit of the course had been that it had improved their confidence in themselves. Several HE staff, however, found former BEC/BTEC students to have been “over-confident”. It seems likely that the cultural clash of the products of BEC/BTEC’s activity based learning (incorporating a strong emphasis on oral presentations, group work, and informal interactions with lecturers) with the more sedentary ethos of those arriving from traditional A Level courses was a factor where this perception was present. More speculatively, it may be that in the eyes of some university lecturers the presence of former BEC/BTEC students was seen as a refusal to acknowledge that their place should be in the “central engine room” and not in academia. For some HE lecturers the changing constituency of higher education represented a deterioration not only of “standards” but also of the nature of their work.



## **In Conclusion: Strengths and Weaknesses**

Respondents to the survey were asked to briefly indicate the major strengths/benefits (if any) which they would associate with BEC/BTEC courses. A very large number of replies were made and these are featured in full in *Appendix B*. Some sample responses, selected to indicate a range of views, appear below:

### **FE Lecturer**

*"Students who are not confident about exams (which is only one form assessment) can achieve and produce excellent work. With a broad base in Business and Finance matters, students can, through their experiences and achievements, make a more informed choice about their career and/or study path. With continuous assessment and the opportunity to re-submit work students can exhibit competence and achievement without the fear of 'failure'. Through assignment work students have the opportunity to explore topics in greater depth over the time-scale permitted."*

### **HE Lecturers**

*"It enables a pathway for some students with lower academic standards to progress at their own speed and subsequently to do very well. Group work is part of the learning style."*

*"In my experience such courses promote valuable practical skills and other attributes e.g. teamwork abilities. The ability to relate their classroom experience to the 'Real World' is also likely to be more apparent than in alternative A level course. Other potential benefits include confidence building through encouraging public speaking, encouraging individual research and a more creative approach to academic study."*

An HE lecturer who suggested that the strengths/benefits of BTEC were that it was, "Easier for students. Fairly impossible to fail." was clearly of a sarcastic disposition. Other views were as follows:

### **HE Admission Tutor**

*"The practical basis, encouragement of students to conduct their own research, and development of often very good communication skills give them some real strengths and a useful degree of self confidence. An educational opportunity for those unsuitable for A Levels."*



**School Teachers**

*"Students development of self reliance and ability to organise their studies (and themselves). Confidence development. Industrial awareness. Life skills development. We have found that BTEC students are better at research than A Level students because of the emphasis on life/self skills training."*

*"It gives students who are unable to cope with A Level studies opportunities to gain access to higher education and better jobs. Our BTEC students are much more resourceful than A Level students and work better both on their own and in groups."*

**Employers**

*"The courses encourage a 'thinking' approach, and provide a wide mix of subject coverage."*

*"The main strength is that it is nationally recognised and requires a disciplined approach of the students. The discipline is achieved by taking attendance and homework results into account. You cannot get through solely by 'cramming' before the exam which is possible in many courses. I would not like to see this watered down - particularly I am against dropping the exam."*

**Professional Body Representative**

*"The syllabus has a bias towards practical application although the academic underpinning knowledge is not ignored. Teaching method has leant towards 'discovery' rather than direct teaching which I believe is more effective. BEC led the way in more practical assessment and this was greatly followed by the polytechnics."*

**Careers Adviser**

*"Overview of subject areas/specialism - wide ranging and offering a good basis for employment in the appropriate sector or further study. Work placements offer an invaluable and realistic taste of work, which allows students to confirm career ideas before commitment to employment/further study."*

**BTEC National Students**

*"Work skills and knowledge skills. These are strengths as well as benefits."*

*"You get more experience and employers are recognising it more now."*

**Former BTEC National Students**

*"Helps your team skills. Enables you to research projects. Subjects are relevant to higher education and can be built upon. Gives you confidence to speak out."*

*"The BTEC course taught me to more confident when working with others. I was able to take charge when needed but also felt I could sit back and work effectively alone as well."*

*"Very practical - can be applied to different situations. Most BTEC courses offer a number of different assessments for each subject - this gives the student a better chance of gaining the appropriate grade. Tests your ability rather than how well you can learn something and repeat it 'parrot fashion'."*

It is clear that the main strengths associated with BTEC are those of skills development (especially communication and research skills). The practical emphasis of the courses appears to have given many students the ability to work both independently and in groups. As mentioned above, a common theme was that the courses developed confidence through presentations and group work.

Some examples of views which were stated when respondents were invited to identify major weaknesses/problems (if any) which they would associate with BEC/BTEC courses appear below (see *Appendix B* for full details):

#### **FE Lecturers**

*"Lack of emphasis on traditional skills (3 Rs). Watering down of subject specialisation into Common Skills (some of them nebulous and difficult to understand). Quality dependent on staff at individual colleges. Continuous assessment enables students to forget everything. Gobbledygook in specifications."*

*"Standards don't appear comparable with A Level. Assignments too heavy, too time consuming for student and teacher. Administrative work required of tutor is considerable."*

#### **HE Lecturers**

*"Tendency for students to provide quantity rather than quality. Some lack of academic depth of study. Variability of standards between colleges."*

*"The tendency to force feed material discourages student independence. The 'training' emphasis is fine but a broader stripe of education should be added to the courses. This would help with later progression. BTEC procedures are heavy on 'weighing' but light on*



*advice to tutors on process. BTEC is 'cheap' because it has not tried to improve the education/training process. This is probably wise as a 'keep costs down' procedure but eventually you get what you pay for."*

*"Lack of academic rigour. Internal assessment resulting in variable standards between institutions. I know of ex-colleagues falsifying results (not here). Students become more confident but they fail to know the limits of their knowledge."*

*"Low quality work. Legalised copying. Watering down of standards. No decent maths in it at all."*

*"Lack of intellectual rigour. Abundance of in-course assignments hinder ability to practice [exam?] techniques. Poor students appear to be obtaining a qualification due to high coursework marks offsetting poor exam performance. Difficult to identify whether coursework is students own or 'borrowed'."*

*"Broad 'tar brush' treatment of subject matter leaves important gaps in student knowledge - it also gives a false sense of confidence."*

#### **HE Admission Tutors**

*"Quality of students is very variable - lack of consistency of standards. Lack of critical thought."*

*"A lack of rigour, especially in numeracy and mathematical aspects. Continuous assessment at the expense of exams enables poor students to dictate level, pace and content of courses. Most courses therefore seem to have very little content."*

*"Suspected variability in grading practices between colleges. Students very often have poorly developed analytical skills. Frequently insufficient emphasis on quantitative techniques. Sometimes, excessive emphasis on collecting information to the detriment of using it. 1990 Common Skills programme a real disaster. Practice of leaving unit assessment until end of year 2 difficult for admissions work."*

#### **Student FE Lecturer**

*"The main weakness to me is that the courses are assignment driven. Many of the assignments which I have seen have been very lengthy (one had over 30 pages) and students are given too many weeks to complete their work. Most are not mature enough to plan their time and in consequence I thought a lot of the work was inadequate."*

#### **School Teacher**

*"Stigma from other pupils/staff. Poor knowledge of what these courses are about:- careers officers, Universities, senior managers in schools, non-BTEC staff, parents, pupils in lower school. Marketing is vital but*



*resources for such limited. Funding resources for the BTEC courses themselves."*

### **Employer**

*"In general they do not prepare students for the practical situation at work in a professional accountants. We find that students with a BTEC often struggle when they progress to AAT or ACCA courses which are exam based as they have had little practice. This will of course change with AAT now that it is more competence based."*

### **Professional Body Representatives**

*"Variable standards between centres. Difficulty in involving employers in moderation process. Language ('BECspeak'). Mismatch in approach providing a poor preparation for later professional studies."*

*"Lack of confidence that the same standards are maintained in every college. Bureaucracy and jargon have put some employers off the scheme. Prejudice in favour of A Levels. Introduction of NVQs has confused students and employers."*

### **BTEC National Students**

*"Not regarded highly enough."*

*"Teachers don't hassle students enough for late assignments and attendance and ignorance."*

*"Not writing essays, doesn't prepare you for uni."*

### **Former BTEC National Students**

*"The means of assessing the course vary from subject to subject and college to college i.e. one college sets exams another doesn't. This would seem unfair and not standardised."*

*"Some students tend to cheat with coursework by working together when it should be an individual attempt. More difficult to access degree courses."*

*"Assignment deadlines not firm enough. Some students could use previous years student assignments to finish own - assignments are not very different from year to year. Course units only taught to a basic rather than advanced standard."*

*"The only weakness of the BTEC was the way students were able to 'get round' the staff when they believed they deserved a better grade (after it had been marked) i.e. student is aggrieved when they receive a Merit and believe they should have received a Distinction. I personally believe the staff's mark should be final, unless there was a true grievance or an injustice which should be rectified."*

*"One of the major weaknesses of BTEC in my opinion is the lack of appreciation/recognition for BTEC. Whatever is said BTEC is considered inferior to A Level qualifications. BTEC needs to be portrayed as a serious qualification rather than something which is renowned to be a 'dossy, easy to pass' course."*

*"Unlike A Levels, to pass the BTEC all we had to do was to hand in our coursework on time and make sure we presented a good piece of work. The marking of the coursework was left to the tutor alone. I remember of occasions when an external co-ordinator [moderator] came to remark coursework. But I think it would have been better if every piece of coursework has been assessed by an external examiner. This would at least enhance the credibility of the BTEC qualification in higher education establishments. (I'm not criticizing my own grades at any point.)"*

*"If a person goes into higher education they are not prepared for all the essay writing to be done there. Maybe BTEC should think about this, as I personally was not prepared for writing essays and this is the main part of my degree!!"*

Many of the perceived weaknesses/problems associated with BTEC courses arose from “progressive” aspects of the pedagogy prescribed for the course. Prime amongst these were the lack of formal examination practice and essay writing skills. Group work was seen, in some cases, as an avenue for plagiarism (“copying”) or the achievement of unmerited high grades. The emphasis on course work was also considered to provide opportunities for plagiarism. A lack of academic rigour was cited with students seen by HE staff as prone to offer quantity rather than quality. The alleged variability of standards between centres was seen as a major problem. Other weaknesses were the poor image of BTEC and its relatively low profile.

Given that by 1994 the BTEC National Diploma was, effectively, being phased out respondents to the questionnaires were invited to comment on whether or not they regarded BTEC GNVQs as a positive or negative development of the



BTEC curriculum. The majority knew too little about GNVQ developments and felt unable to respond. Some examples of replies received appear below:

**FE Student Lecturer**

*"Negative. Just as BTECs are getting some recognition things are changing again. GNVQs will need to be communicated from scratch to HE and employers BUT external assessment is a good idea which will give courses credibility."*

**HE Lecturers**

*I see GNVQs as another misunderstood variant of the BTEC variety. The existing system was designed for a certain type of student i.e. vocationally based, why produce another one? More effort should have been put in to show the better sides of City and Guilds and BTEC than creating a whole new section of courses which just goes on to create more costs and less quality plus confusion by employers of educational standards generally."*

*"GNVQs again create 'tick list' competencies. Education and integration disappear as the evaluation process takes over. As one insightful farmer remarked 'You can't fatten pigs by weighing 'em!' And he is right. GNVQs drag us down the 'weigh 'em at all costs' route. The use of easily obtained Government money has inevitably attracted the Managers of education to the GNVQ arena. Employers are now breaking away as the early subsidies are gradually being withdrawn. The GNVQ is the result of Tory interference with the rights of young people, regrettably often with the connivance of cross party co-operation. Most youngsters have no choice but to co-operate. The craven and morality free nature of 'bringing bums on seats at all costs' to Further and Higher Education is a result of having 'Education Managers' rather than teachers set the agenda."*

**Careers Adviser**

*"Admissions Tutors have just about accepted the BTEC National Diploma and so it is likely to be hard work gaining acceptance of the GNVQ which seems to involve the student in too much pointless administration and assessment. Unfortunately I do not feel positive about the GNVQ. Is it change for changes sake when the National was just about gaining recognition?"*

Other comments of interest included the following:

**Professional Body Representative**

*"I believed that BEC and then BTEC was an amazing innovation which has had far reaching effects in further and higher education. Despite the growing pains and worries over standards it has been largely accepted..."*



### **Careers Adviser**

*"I feel very confused about the new developments and the way in which they are being marketed to students - I haven't seen anything directed towards employers which actually explains what they are. All the publicity material from awarding bodies looks very good but never says anything. Obviously in a period of transition there is bound to be confusion, just as BTEC National was beginning to be something people could relate to it is being replaced..."*

The BEC and BTEC National Diploma is an award which was often criticised on the basis of the learning and assessment styles which were prescribed for it. The comments made by those employers and HE staff who expressed negative views often suggest a conservatism and an antipathy towards student centredness and continuous assessment. For those students who speak warmly of their BEC/BTEC courses there is frequently a sense that the learning styles which the course promoted enabled them to grow in ways which would not have been otherwise available to them. In many respects the BEC/BTEC course may be seen as having given a "second chance" to those who would not have responded to the A Level alternative. Some former BEC/BTEC students prospered in HE and employment, others floundered, much as is the case with A Level students too. If statistics indicate that BEC/BTEC students were more likely to "drop out" of HE an imponderable is how many of those people would otherwise never have reached HE? When seen in terms of individual biographies, or even in the context of groups/categories of students, there is no simple balance sheet for the influence of these courses, and no easy (or complex) "good thing/bad thing" equation.

The acceptability of BEC/BTEC awards in Higher Education needs to be placed in the wider context of the transition from an elite to a mass system of higher education. This has been facilitated, in substantial measure, by an expansion of vocational related departments in the “New Universities” (former polytechnics). The political rhetoric of inclusiveness and a civic ethos which increasingly promotes conceptions of “equality of opportunity” has meant that in recent years many individuals have entered university who, twenty years ago (when BEC courses were been newly introduced in FE colleges), would not have aspired to do so. As a consequence of this the meaning of “graduateness” is being redefined as, more radically, is the meaning and function of the university (Cowen 1996; Lyotard 1984; Scott 1993; Williams 1989). Old attitudes, however, survive in new times. So do some old realities, such as the fact that society is still structured differentially in ways which need to be legitimated. One excellent device for achieving this is through educational awards. The Educational Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser 1971a) may be a theoretical construct, but it is one which still explains a great deal.

It is clear from much of the evidence presented above that many (though, it should be stressed, by no means all) BEC/BTEC students internalised what their education and what their *experience* of the views of others had taught them; that is that they are confident in interactions, but not good in examinations. They generally believe that they would not have been capable of A Levels. They usually recognised that they would be unlikely to gain entry to elite universities, they understood that it would be better to apply

somewhere else. In that sense, and in other ways, they were allowed some aspirations and excluded from others. The BEC/BTEC curriculum provided a way forward for thousands of individuals who would almost certainly have been failed, in one way or another, by the alternative A Level route. It created opportunities though certain high status higher education and professional destinations remained very largely closed to BEC/BTEC students. Whilst some former BEC/BTEC students were confident in their identity a great many expressed feelings of inferiority, and felt that they were regarded as “second rate” by both academics and employers. This, however, did not mean that they were unable to recognise the benefits which BEC/BTEC had given them, as the sentiments of the following two former BTEC students illustrate:

*"Although I feel BTEC doesn't give very good revision techniques for exams, I do not wish I had done A Levels as an alternative. The skills BTEC gives a student are essential and from doing a BTEC I would say that I have much more confidence in researching and speaking to people than I would have if I had done A Levels. BTEC helps in the social side of Higher Education because it develops your listening and group interaction skills."*

*"Personally I would disagree with anyone saying that BTEC is inferior to A Level. I can see myself developing skills I acquired from BTEC while doing coursework but I get surpassed by other students when it comes to exams which count for two thirds of the marks. Anyway, I think BTEC has been one of my worthwhile experiences which I'll treasure for life."*

The BEC/BTEC National Diploma has a complex place in the field of educational classification and hierarchies. There are official positions which speak mostly of its equivalence to the GCE A level and its acceptability for entry to this or that university or programme of professional training. There are the personal beliefs of various “gate-keepers”, and of former students about what it means and represents. These personal beliefs have fed, and



have equally fed off, a collective understanding around such powerful concepts as status, value, and credibility. In all such categories the vocational curriculum is known as one which is necessary, important, worthwhile, and yet fundamentally circumscribed by its intrinsically instrumental nature. It is the individual recognition of limits which is part of what it means to be rendered governable (Foucault 1991), and that is still the prime need for any kind of effective vocational deployment. Foucault recognises that the individual is “...the fictitious atom of an ‘ideological’ representation of society...” but he goes on to argue that we “...must cease once and for all...” (ibid. p. 194) to conceive power in negative terms, that is as a form of repression or as an exclusionary device. Foucault suggests that power “...produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth.” (ibid.). A curriculum may well be seen as an instrument, or a machine, which is situated within domains and power structures, which is filled with rituals, and which manufactures *kinds* of truth. The evidence of BEC/BTEC, however, is that whilst a curriculum may empower by enhancing life chances and by enabling individuals to develop in terms of their knowledge and skills, it *can* also repress and it *can* be exclusionary in its consequences for some people, at particular times, and in certain circumstances. Different curricula are not the same and some are, in Orwellian terms, more equal than others.

## **Chapter Eight**

### **CONCLUSION(S): FOUR CRITIQUES**

Vocationalism is not as value-free as it would pretend. It is an ideology representing the interests of corporatism, of economy and of profit.

Barnett (1994) (p. 68)

#### **Introduction**

Chapter 2 above outlined a rationale for the choice of four thinkers who might “...collectively offer the prospect of illuminating distinct aspects of the vocational curriculum.” (p. 45). It was suggested that, because of their differences, they offered the possibility of producing a coherent narrative which might contain some theoretically based insights into the history and experience of the vocational curriculum in England. Such an account would, it was cautioned, be disjunctive in parts, perhaps necessarily so. This study has focused on one instance of vocationalism in one country, and it would therefore be injudicious to claim that the particular curriculum discussed is one where characteristics identified and connections made might be seamlessly generalisable either nationally or internationally. This is a curriculum history, and all histories, whatever commonalties of time, place or subject may bind them, are unique and also ultimately incomplete. Choices must be made about what to include and what to exclude. Certain sources, inevitably, remain unexplored, either accidentally or by design. A curriculum history, like historical biography, is partially circumscribed both by “happenstance” and by authorial subjectivity.

The BTEC National was a vocational curriculum which had a significance which is belied by the relatively meagre attention it has received comparative to GCE A Levels, NVQs, and the GNVQs which followed and effectively superceded it. Beyond a flurry of papers which appeared in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, now a respected Carfax journal but at that time an unrefereed publication of the lecturers' union NATFHE, BEC/BTEC was rarely subjected to formal academic scrutiny and discussion. Curriculum studies did not extend so far from the mainstream as to incorporate BEC/BTEC in the "Cinderella World" of FE and, despite the large numbers of students who registered on these awards, it became the curriculum that never was. More recently some ethnographically based studies have touched on aspects of the experience of BTEC students (Bates 1990, Riseborough 1992, Avis 1996c and 1997). Bloomer (1997), in a large scale Leverhulme funded study focusing mainly on A Level and GNVQ students, offers (pp. 48-62) what is perhaps the only extended appreciation of BTEC as a curriculum to have appeared in the context of a major monograph in the whole of the education related literature. Whilst some recent discussions of policy development in relation to post-16 educational provision have outlined the delicate relationship which existed between BTEC and NCVQ prior to the launch of GNVQs (Sharp 1998, Williams 1999), there has not been an attempt to connect the BEC/BTEC enterprise to any kind of meta-theoretical analysis. This may be because such a thing as a non-advanced post-compulsory curriculum, particularly one which is vocational in nature, has been considered too banal a subject for theorisation.



## Gramsci

Gramsci (1971), as discussed above (pp. 46-59), was concerned about the trend which he discerned in Mussolini's Italy towards the adoption of a vocationalism which was aimed primarily at the children of the working class, arguing that,

Schools of the vocational type (...) are beginning to predominate over the formative school, which is not immediately "interested". The most paradoxical aspect of it all is that this new type of school appears to be advocated as being democratic, while in fact it is destined not merely to perpetuate social differences but to crystallise them... (p. 40)

BEC/BTEC programmes, along with other vocational schemes, have had minimal take up in the private education sector which has been so resurgent during the period of BEC/BTEC's existence, underlining the fact that these programmes have not been popular with the middle classes. Entwistle (1979) has highlighted the principle, found in both Dewey and Marxism, that education should focus on work in order that real learning might take place through a theory-practice nexus. Gramsci (1971) argued that,

The discovery that the relations between the social and natural orders are mediated by work, by man's theoretical and practical activity, creates the first elements of an intuition of the world free from all magic and superstition. (p. 34)

Entwistle (1979) points out that Gramsci believed not only that schools should introduce work as the "...fundamental cultural activity..." but also that work is "...intrinsic to the activity of learning..." (p. 53). Ostensibly this means that the new vocationalism, including the BEC/BTEC National course, might fit this Gramscian principle. Two provisos, however, have to be considered. The first is that Gramsci argued for a single educational system for all. Secondly, he recognised that intellectualism was organic to the productive process and that, therefore, a component of historical humanism was necessary within the

vocational curriculum (Sharp 1996, quoting Entwistle, explicates this point nicely). No significant trace of historical humanism, outside a few early and subsequently abandoned option modules (which were, in any case, not widely offered by colleges), can be found in the BEC/BTEC National in Business and Finance curriculum (or in the Advanced GNVQ in Business which followed it).

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is relevant here. The contest for the soul of education in England may be caricatured, though the caricature is hardly unfair, as one between established traditional values and practices entrenched in the elite institutions, and the newer liberal progressive ideas which, whilst actually having their roots in the Enlightenment, are now often associated with Sixties radicalism. Conspiracy theorists might be forgiven a nightmare in which "Big Brother" had chosen a liberal/progressive model for vocational education precisely because of the low status attached to it and in the knowledge that it would not facilitate the emergence of a "self conscious working class" or, to employ another Gramscian term, of "organic intellectuals" in and of the working class. Hickox (1995) has reviewed some of the arguments which see vocationalism as a means of social control, be it via the promotion of individualised conceptions of failure or, more prosaically, the creation and manipulation of cheap labour. In a sophisticated discussion of motives/rationales for the pressures towards vocational education Hickox chooses, in what is a complex and ambiguous terrain, to be sceptical of the currently extant analyses of vocationalism. The essence of Gramsci's critique of schooling, as Apple (1996) pointed out, was of a practical education which

would serve ruling class interests "...under the guise of egalitarian rhetoric..."

(p. 103). Gramsci (1971) argued that,

The most widespread error of method seems to me that of having looked for (...) distinction in the intrinsic nature of intellectual activities, rather than in the ensemble of the system of relations in which these activities (...) have their place in the general complex of social relations (...) Indeed the worker (...) is not specifically characterised by his manual or instrumental work, but by performing this work in specific social relations... (p. 8)

In the modern world, technical education, closely bound to industrial labour even at the most primitive and unqualified level, must form the basis of the new type of intellectual. (p. 9)

In a world which has been widely defined as postmodern, Gramsci's invocation, excepting his use of the perhaps now archaic word "industrial", seems to take on new potential as social relations are, as a consequence of new technologies, caught in complexities which blur boundaries. Emerging industries, with modes of production and consumption based primarily on the creative use of accessible and relatively cheap information, are generating new learning needs as well as the scope for new pedagogies based on emerging "virtual universities". If, as Barnett (1994) (with heavy irony) suggests, we are all clerks now but "There are clerks and there are clerks." (p. 40), it is also the case that social relations have become, and are becoming, more "slippery". It may well be that Gramsci's formulations of "traditional" and "organic" *intellectuals* will come to make more sense to us in the early years of the Twenty First Century than they did in the last decades of the Twentieth.



Young (1998), like Entwistle (1979), has pointed to the parallel between Dewey's notion of a "liberal vocationalism", through which his concept of "occupation" might serve "...as the organizing principle for the curriculum." (p. 55), and Gramsci's idea of work being an educational principle through which workers would be able to "...understand the context of their work and the economic, social and cultural implications of their skills" (ibid.). Gramsci's logic was, as Young asserts, connected to "...the Marxist view that [the] industrial working class and therefore industrial work itself, could be an emancipatory force in history and therefore an educational principle". (p. 56). More deeply than this, however, it was grounded in Marx's conception that it is through work that the individual is constituted. In the *Grundrisse* (Marx 1977), the idea of the socially determined production of individuals through the processes of production, consumption, distribution and exchange is elaborated on the basis that,

Man is in the most literal sense of the word a *zoon politikon*, not only a social animal, but an animal which can develop into an individual only in society. Production by isolated individuals outside society - something which might happen as an exception to a civilised man who by accident got into the wilderness and already possessed within himself the forces of society - is as great an absurdity as the idea of the development of language without individuals living together and talking to each other. (p. 346)

Young (1998) suggests that Dewey's and Gramsci's concepts

...can in a connective relationship that might be described as critical vocationalism, be the dual principles of a 14-19 curriculum. The principles of critical vocationalism would give priority to the ways that young people can relate to work and to knowledge...It would draw on academic subjects...and draw on the work experience of students... (p. 56)

The "information explosion" which has characterised the late Twentieth Century, together with the associated processes of technologisation, globalisation and the production of new cultural forms opens up additional dimensions to the debates surrounding culture, ideology, hegemony and education. Terms such as "cyberculture" and "cyberspace" have been widely used to denote the new realm of high speed and flexible communication based on a virtual community (part real, part imaginary) of computer users. It must be acknowledged that these terms present dangers of reification and that, for some proponents of the new age of leisure and enlightenment, they also carry a messianic/mystical dimension. Holub (1992) has discussed Gramsci's formulations of the intellectual in relation to these extraordinary social forces, arguing specifically that his notion of the "organic intellectual", (or "new intellectual" which would emerge from the then emerging production relations), might now be usefully conceptualised as a "critical specialist", that is one who

...participates in specialised forms of production, distribution and exchange, while simultaneously purviewing the place of this form of production and distribution in a system of relations. That model of intellectuality is not a technocrat of advancing capitalism, but of a 'critical community', which, tied to processes of rationalization and technologization in the sphere of material and cultural production, does not forfeit attempts to grasp conceptually the systems and subsystems within which the rationalization and technologization take place. Rather, it critiques such processes should the democratic project become jeopardized. (p. 168)

The problem of relocating Gramsci's analysis from inter-war Italy to the actual (and also, by implication, virtual) realities of "now" is characterised by Holub as being one of "differential pragmatics" (ibid. p. 171). A fundamental issue arising from the new social forces is the extent to which the applications of



information technology may prove to be ultimately negative or positive for society as a whole. Certainly the imminent presence of relatively cheap and widely distributed information technology opens up massive potential for the construction of "counternarratives" (Giroux, Lankshear, McLaren and Peters 1996), and through these, perhaps for the construction of counter-hegemonic ideas outside the old social structures which were so central to Gramsci's world view.

The new possibilities which cyberspace offers for the construction of a critical pedagogy have been optimistically discussed by Lankshear, Peters and Knobel (1996) who, in conceptualising "critical pedagogy" as a form of "cultural politics" (p. 150), acknowledge their debt to Friere (1970). Ransome (1992) has remarked on the overlap between Gramsci's prescriptions for education and Friere's concept of an "activist pedagogy" (p. 183), and McLaren (1996) sees Friere's position as "...reflecting Gramsci's notion that the structural intentionality of human beings needs to be critically interrogated through a form of conscientization..." (p. 127). Lankshear, Peters and Knobel (1996), pointing to the way in which cybertextuality melts boundaries between the reader and the writer, and thereby challenges the omniscience of the book, argue that democratisation is a consequence of the "Virtual Community" which cyberspace conjures into existence. Their discussion of the implications of cyberspace for the "Word-World Relation", (the recognition that language is contiguous to "...the myriad webs of social practice that comprise our social-cultural reality..." (ibid. p. 164), suggests that the disintegration of institutional enclosure which is now presaged will permit



forms of "transcendence" which are the "...essence of radical pedagogy." (ibid. p. 168).

Gramsci had a strong belief in the social and political power of education, that is, in its emancipatory possibilities. Living in a period before the existence of a true mass media and prior to the political disablement of Marxism, he nevertheless was the author of a still influential and persuasive analysis of the social mechanisms of capitalism. Today the huge potential of communication technologies opens up new dimensions, positive and negative, for the social construction of knowledge. In this sense the issue of ideological equilibrium, of how hegemony can be sustained or disrupted, has acquired a new resonance. At the core of this complex are issues of education, of the relation of the individual to work and to technology, and through these interactive processes, the reconstitution of society. In this context the continued relevance of Gramsci in the sphere of education lies in the (contested) legacy of his opposition to "interested" vocationalism, and in his prescription for a rigorous learning experience as a prerequisite for the building of a more equitable society. If his writings on the curriculum and on pedagogy have, through their rootedness in the practical political concerns of inter-war Italy, taken on labyrinthine nuances and thereby lost their power to directly inform current debates, they do at least address issues in such a way as to initiate discussions around the place of vocationalism in the curriculum and associated pedagogic issues. Moreover, the contribution which Gramsci made through his analysis of ideological hegemony represents what is potentially the most potent approach to the problem of understanding and

controlling the new forces of production and modes of information. The aims of vocational curricula in England have not yet been not been informed by any such analysis, and, given the historical circumstances of their production, it is perhaps unrealistic to think that they might have been. Certainly the BEC vision as articulated in the Council's *First Policy Statement* (BEC 1976) carried no residue of the then so recent "Sixties radical thinking". Indeed, together with the *Haslegrave Report* (DES 1969) which preceded it and gave birth to BEC, the *First Policy Statement* was redolent of 1950s post-War social thinking. The BEC National curriculum, however, when it appeared in 1977 (BEC 1977b) would prove to be thoroughly modern in terms of its structure and pedagogy. Circumstances have now changed. The challenge to make the vocational curriculum *critical* in both content and ethos must be placed at the centre of the educational project by those who would seek to dissolve the academic/vocational divide through working against economic contradictions and the associated social antagonisms. The virtual disappearance of social class as a issue in mainstream politics, and of Marxian thinking from policy debates, mean that ideas are more difficult to stigmatise and that pariah status is not so easily achieved. In that sense there is, for the moment, an opportunity to think radically about what might constitute vocational education.

## **Althusser**

Chapter 2 contained (pp. 59-63) an outline of relevant aspects of Althusser's thought, focusing specifically on his model of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) which gave primacy to education as the predominant ISA in



contemporary capitalism. The abstraction of Althusser's ideas made them far less digestible, especially in the context of English pragmatism, than those of Gramsci (Johnson 1980). Though some academics were beguiled by the theoretical beauty of Althusser's work it quickly became apparent that a logical response to the overwhelming power of his determinism might be passivity in the face of the forces of history (Sarup 1978). Furthermore, Althusser was charged with an "...irredeemingly 'positivist'..." epistemology (McCarney 1989 p. 122). For the great majority of social theorists this was sufficient reason to consign Althusser firmly to the intellectual museum, classified in the category "famous errors". In 1992, on the posthumous publication of Althusser's autobiography (Althusser 1992) [described on the cover as a "story of genius, madness and murder"], there was a rekindling of interest (Elliott 1994a), but this time Althusser had moved into the bay marked "freaks and curios". As long ago as 1980 Richard Johnson suggested that

...it has become easier than it was two or so years ago, to argue that practical needs are best served by combining...elements from different intellectual and political traditions. Intellectually, there are perhaps two especially useful tasks. the first is to stress the *common* elements...the second is deliberately to promote the understanding of *particular contemporary problems* over the over-valued pursuit of theoretical purity or partisanship. (Johnson 1980 p. 9)

At various points in preceding chapters the ideas of Althusser have been invoked. Althusser's work raises, in the context of this study, two particularly interesting questions. The first relates to the ideology which a curriculum might inculcate. The second concerns the instrumentality and essential nature of institutions operating within society; in this case the state founded awarding body BEC/BTEC. Althusser's essay on "ideological State Apparatuses" identified different "portions" of youth who are produced by the education



system to fill the posts appropriate to a particular strata and for which they are provided with a particular ideology. The stated original aims of the BEC National (BEC 1977b) (see *Table 7* on page 201 above), in addition to a number of highly instrumental injunctions relating to immediate employability, included the inculcation of a "...flexible response to the changing demands of business and society..." (p. 5); these aims were still very largely intact when the last true (that is non-NCVQ accredited) BTEC curriculum model [in this study called "Generation 3"] was issued in 1992 (BTEC 1992a). Added to these aims were the need for the creation of an ability to "...transfer skills to different working environments..."; the enhancement of motivation and the development of "...personal qualities relevant to supervisory and managerial work..."; and the fostering of "...a positive and dynamic approach towards working in business and the public sector..." (ibid. p. 3). A reference to the curriculum providing a basis for, and encouraging progression to, further studies was not elaborated on. Here was a curriculum which would produce, ideally, a flexible and motivated working person with the appropriate qualities to fit them for supervisory or management positions. The idea of a person who might be capable of contextualising business, of someone able to think critically outside the popular mantras of management theory, of an individual with the social disposition to engage in community/emancipatory activity was, of course, absent. For these things to be present would have constituted an open contradiction. The ideology of vocationalism is not open or even self-conscious, it is, in line with Althusser's (1969) definition of an ideology

...a system (with its own logic and rigour) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case), endowed with a historical existence and role within a given society. (p. 231)

The BEC, BTEC, and Edexcel were/are real institutions, not just social constructs (though they are also that), with economic imperatives and a function in society. Using Althusser's schema they belong to the superstructure of society and, classically, are, "in the final instance" determined by the base (the economy). Althusser employed the concept of "overdetermination" in order to explain the process by which determination might function in a complex structured social formation where levels articulate in ways which are reciprocally determining in their relationships. Althusser's edifice certainly creaks, and as a universal *explanation* it has all but collapsed, nonetheless it may afford certain insights in some situations. Why, for example, was BTEC able to seemingly survive the arrival on the scene of NCVQ when the rationale for its existence, as a producer of curricula as well as an awarding body, had gone? Now it is, apparently, in a period of fade out, and in time the name BTEC will fully dissolve into Edexcel of which, for the time being, it is an "operating division" (Edexcel 1996). Althusser (1969) suggested that

...the economic dialectic is never active in the pure state; in history, these instances, the super-structures etc. - are never seen to step respectfully aside when their work is done or, when the Time comes, as his pure phenomena, to scatter before His Majesty the Economy as he strikes along the royal road of the Dialectic. From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes. (p. 113)

The effective end of BTEC as a curriculum creating body by means of the power invested in and exercised by the NCVQ, and the consequent birth of GNVQs, might be taken to have signalled the full and unmitigated incorporation of vocational FE within what can be legitimately termed the Educational ISA. The fundamental instrumentality which the quasi-



independence of BEC/BTEC, together with its strong commitment to *learning*, had served to mask was both amplified and thrown into stark relief. That is the theory, and that is manifestly the case.

## **Foucault**

He [Foucault] is well aware...of the attempt made by his former teacher and colleague, Louis Althusser, to salvage the theory of determination by replacing the two-tier model of base and superstructure by a number of autonomous instances, linked together by causal reciprocity. But Althusser never operates on other than an abstract model...Meanwhile, Foucault...had already...shown how a discursive practice can be related to its contemporary non-discursive practices.

Sheridan (1980) (pp. 106-107)

It is not intended, in this context, to pursue Foucault's, (or subsequently Lyotard's), interest in discourse and/or language games. In Chapter 2 certain profound differences and less obvious continuities between Foucault and Althusser were indicated (see pages 63-67). Amongst the continuities was their shared "anti-Humanism". A major difference was Foucault's rejection of ideology linked to the mode of production and his belief that discourses carry their own power relations. Althusser's individuals were subordinated by ideology, whilst for Foucault they were disempowered by "the gaze" (surveillance). In consequence Foucault does not locate power in any kind of state apparatus but rather sees it as exercised at the level of individual interaction. It is this which makes Foucault's work of interest at the key site on which a curriculum is experienced, that is the classroom. Here is a social and physical environment which requires certain modes of behaviour and, whether the scenario is one of a traditional teacher delivered lecture or small group activity based learning which the teacher "facilitates", there are specific



expectations and power relations at play (a process which Foucault called the “micro-physics” of power).

Student centredness as a philosophy, one which may be fairly stated to have been at the pedagogical core of BEC/BTEC, is in many ways ideal as a mode through which power might be exercised not *on* individuals (as would be the case with traditional instructional teaching) but *through* them. The students are given responsibility for a large measure of self-regulation and self-*discipline*. Central to this is the practice of confession. The Skills component introduced into BTEC courses in 1985 (BTEC 1985a) required students to “...establish appropriate *personal* goals...” and to “...manage *own* time effectively” [italics added] (p. 24). This was modified in 1992 (BTEC 1992e) when an assessed component was “Manage own roles and responsibilities”. Assessment of these skills was undertaken by tutors who frequently employed such refinement techniques as self and peer group assessment (see Fisher 1991). By 1993 the introduction of the GNVQ model [Generation 4], incorporating the “Grading Theme” of “Evaluation”, saw students being required openly to reflect on the inadequacies of their performance in the form of written statements the texts of which were not infrequently redolent of Maoist self-denunciation sessions.

The trajectory from BEC's General and Learning Objectives to GNVQ's Elements and Performance Criteria essentially represents a developmental process through which the requirements expected of students were gradually tightened at the same time as the processes by which students might achieve

the stated outcomes were relaxed. Students would know what was expected of them and were given the “freedom” to achieve what had been pre-specified. Discussions of this “empowerment” in relation to GNVQ may be found in Bates (1998a and 1998b), Bloomer (1998) and Knight, Helsby and Saunders (1998).

Reference was made in Chapter 2 to the work of Gore (1995) who, deploying a Foucauldian analysis, had investigated eight major “techniques of power” in four different educational sites. These techniques are surveillance, normalisation, exclusion, classification, distribution, individualisation, totalisation, and regulation. It was noted that each of these practices is commonplace within the educational experience, and that they often co-exist or overlap. Together they constitute what Gore refers to as “the pedagogical regime” (p.169). Following Gore’s schema the brief account of a BTEC National in Business and Finance learning activity undertaken during 1992 which appears below will attempt to describe how each of these eight techniques was deployed within the context of the BTEC curriculum model. The scenario described was not at all untypical of BEC/BTEC teaching situations. BTEC National students working in sub-groups were asked to simulate/role play a wages negotiation exercise. Some were designated to act as managers, others as trade union representatives (three on each side of the negotiation). The majority of the students approached the exercise seriously; as “second year BTECs” they were by now well used to role plays, simulations and presentations. A few even dressed formally for the occasion, fully entering into the “spirit” of the event. Each side was, in advance of the

exercise, given briefing information regarding the state of the company as well as other circumstantial information. The whole group has previously considered negotiating techniques/strategies in a more formal classroom setting where the teacher had presented information in a fairly traditional lecture format. The negotiation exercise was to be held, notionally, in “real time” with up to two hours allocated. It involved the delivery by each side of pre-prepared opening statements followed by open debate across the table within each sub-group. There was the possibility of mutually agreed adjournments with each sub-group for team consultations (a maximum of three, each to be no more than 10 minutes). Gore’s eight “techniques of power” have been deployed to produce the following *ex post facto* account based on contemporary notes.

*Surveillance:* Students were advised in advance that at the close of the activity they would be required to grade each of the other five participants in their sub-group on a standard peer assessment form which was distributed with the activity brief. They were also to indicate the grade which they felt their own performance deserved. These grades were to inform the teacher’s impression and would not be averaged or otherwise calculated. The teacher would attempt to take into account and make allowances for possible antagonisms and/or alliances between students. The teacher’s impressions were, on the basis of the information supplied, subsequently partially challenged but more often confirmed. Given this arrangement the performance of each individual was critically observed and assessed by five fellow students, by the tutor, and by themselves.



*Normalisation:* Each student had a personal copy of the *BTEC Skills Statement* which set out the components of each of the eight skills then associated with the course. Skills which students were expected to exhibit within the exercise included the following, (all of which were specified in BTEC 1985a), drawn from The Skill Area “Communication”,

- listen, question and respond in order to obtain information
- use correct medium of communication and adopt appropriate tone
- recognise, use and respond to non-verbal elements in communication.

Also, from the Skill Area “Working with Others”,

- present oneself in a manner appropriate to the situation
- consult others and exchange information
- put others at ease, listen and help them to communicate
- contribute to the formulation of a group plan of action
- negotiate the realistic allocation of tasks within a group, taking into account strengths and weaknesses of oneself and others
- accept criticism of own contribution and/or modification of own findings
- constructively criticise the contribution of others
- identify and undertake a variety of group roles
- react confidently in both familiar and unfamiliar situations
- recognise situations in which agreement cannot, or should not be reached.

Gore (1995) defined the process of normalisation as “...invoking, requiring, setting or conforming to a standard - defining the normal.” (p. 171). In the instance described the normal was highly defined and the individual students, as well as each sub-group, were expected to be as “normal” as possible within the confines of this abnormal “game” of pretending to negotiate a pay settlement. No fooling around. No eccentricity. No non-conformity. “This will be graded”.

*Exclusion:* A few students refused to participate (or “play”) properly. They exhibited inappropriate body language such as lounging and yawning. One or two flicked paper at “the opposition”, some argued with inappropriate passion and theatrical gesture, lampooning the essential absurdity of the situation imposed on them. These students would not receive good grades. This kind of approach, multiplied over a range of assessments could, in extreme cases, lead to a succession of poor grades and, ultimately, non-progression, even, if sufficiently extravagant, failure (generally at the end of Year 1). The process of exclusion could be relatively short and dramatic (over a period of weeks), or perhaps would occur much less evidently at the next natural hurdle, that of possible progression to HE where mediocre grades and lukewarm references might lead to an absence of offers.

*Classification:* Who were the few students who refused to enter the spirit? They were the mavericks, group jokers, or the “lazy”. Some of these were “bright”, but all were, at times, a “pain” to work with. They were the ones who “spoiled it” for everyone who wanted to learn, for those who had agreed to comply. Informal classifications were mirrored by a system of formal classification through grades.

*Distribution:* The exercise described took place in a large examination hall, affording much more space than a classroom. The hall was arranged with four blocks of “negotiating tables” separated from each other by sufficient distance to create a sense of privacy. The teacher was able to move easily between the groups noting performance. He could move around to “zoom in”

on particular negotiations, or observe the whole scene. He could, using distance, seemingly withdraw, creating the illusion of freedom, or could hover in one location, creating a disciplinary effect where an individual or group appeared to lack application or to have moved “off-topic”. Who was actively contributing? What precisely did they say? Body language was considered. The teacher made notes. The teacher made distribution decisions. A group seeking adjournment had to gain the teacher’s formal assent and were timed. Only the teacher was licensed to move around.

*Individualisation:* On occasions the teacher was tempted to intervene; “Paul, not so loud...”, or was consulted on an informational or procedural point. Here he would sometimes refer to his own experience, perhaps by using a short story, “When I worked in Industrial Relations I...”. The specification of individuals is a powerful technique in pedagogy and interaction.

*Totalisation:* By referring sometimes to collectivities, such as “Trade union negotiators”, “industrial arbitrators”, “when yesterday’s group did this exercise”, power-knowledge relations were invoked by the teacher in order to support and reinforce pedagogic points.

*Regulation:* It was made known in advance that all students would be required to participate in the exercise and that any absentees would be subsequently collected together (if necessary from different groups in the college) to form a special session. Everyone would receive an individual grade and therefore everyone would need to participate properly. This



became internalised. Some students would, when necessary, become unofficial enforcers and berate their peers to “stop messing about”.

The above account briefly outlines a situation of a type which will be broadly familiar to a great many teachers, not only in FE, but also in schools and HE. With BEC and BTEC, however, activities of this kind fairly quickly (in many institutions) became part of the everyday pedagogic fabric of the courses. In (eventually) substantially freeing students from the largely sedentary and passive role as note-takers, which had constituted the general frame of OND pedagogy, BEC/BTEC brought the highly regulated and assessed “freedom” of group work, activity and, ultimately, skills assessment and portfolio building. Through GNVQ this would be taken further by overt recording by students of their planning processes and by systematic self-evaluation. The level of responsibility and self-judgement handed to students has been described by Bates (1998a) as “...imposed autonomy...” (p. 12) Sheridan (1980) suggests that

...it is Foucault's thesis that our own societies are maintained not by army, police, and a centralized, visible state apparatus, but precisely by those techniques of dressage, discipline, and diffused power at work in 'carceral' institutions. (p. 136)

BEC and BTEC were at the forefront of a transformation of pedagogic practice in further education which has spawned a rhetoric of autonomy, independence and empowerment for students. If students want to fail that is up to them. If they want to learn they must comply with the performance criteria.

## Lyotard

In Chapter 2 above, in an outline of aspects of Lyotard's thinking (pages 68-71), it was suggested that an aspect of the postmodern condition is that education as a process has been resituated. Having moved away from the realm of social and moral welfare it is now a fundamentally economic activity. From certain kinds of Marxist perspective the connection between the economic base and the education superstructure has been something of a self evident truth; but here it is not merely a question of connectedness (or correspondence), but of an increasing congruence. Seen in these terms education and economic activity have become, or are rapidly becoming, the same thing. There is a difference between this convergence, however, and the Marxian conception of work as a process of acculturation through which an individual develops *the self*. In the new regimes of work the function of the individual is to comply with the demands of a system where, as within the "old system" of heavy industries, the mode of production is still the "...private appropriation of collectively produced surplus value..." [Bürger (1985) quoted in Peters and Lankshear (1996) (p. 7)].

That a vocational business related curriculum in England should be closely related to capitalist economic activity should come as no surprise. The consequences of this are, perhaps, less obvious. The idea of vocationalism is, as previously noted, one which is essentially at odds with elite English culture and so it is the case that BEC/BTEC (and GNVQs) have struggled to establish themselves as a route to HE and, sometimes, even to certain kinds of employment (see chapter 7). There is academic snobbishness at work, and

as the *petit bourgeois* may appear as an overblown caricature of the *bourgeois*, so it is not unknown for “less established” higher education institutions to exhibit a certain disdain which was less apparent in some traditional universities. There is, however, a real problem and that is that an essentially instrumental education can never be sufficiently critical or questioning so as to present the danger of refusing its purpose. In the ultimate theoretical incarnation of a time after the “End of History” (Fukuyama 1992) this need not be a problem, for there would then be no purpose to refuse (or serve). Knowledge would be near to being obsolete or, at any rate, the concept would need to be reconceptualised in some way. In that particular nascent world, be it a utopia or a nightmare, the productive subject/citizen (“worker” does not seem to be an appropriate term) would not hold a class position, s/he would have multiple capacities/skills which traversed the mental/manual divide. In many respects the development of the curriculum outlined in Chapter 6 reflects such a trend and might, if implemented in a pure way without all the encumbrances of past practices and ideological cross-currents, be capable of producing such a person.

Radical education and the new vocationalism have rejected the traditional discipline based curriculum as a meta-narrative. Competencies (whether expressed as outcomes or elements) allow for an untrammelled flexibility, they can be “cut and pasted” without reference to hallowed discipline boundaries. Assessment criteria and performance criteria enable judgements to be made on the basis of performativity rather than on truth or beauty (Bloland 1995). When Lyotard discussed knowledge in the context of



institutions he was writing primarily about the fate of knowledge in the context of HE, but it is in FE that his argument seems most self evident. It is in FE that the atomisation of the curriculum has been most apparent, and it is there that the veneer of cultural purpose has been most readily abandoned.

## **Coda**

The logic of educational development, especially in the English post-compulsory sector where liberal values were always more tenuous than in the schools or higher education sectors, has necessarily been bound up with the post 1968 triumph of commodity capitalism and the subsequent world-wide defeat of the socialist project. By the early 1990s this historic “watershed” had become geo-politically manifest by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent recasting of the map of Europe. The profound and deep ideological transitions which both made possible and gained momentum from these events were less apparent at the level which circumscribes the capacity of the individual to imagine. The consequence was a retreat from emancipatory aspirations/illusions into technicist (un)inspired modes of thinking.

The social conditions and attendant intellectual climate of England in the mid to late 1970s made possible the creation of an educational agenda which was fundamentally concerned with issues of international competitiveness and the installation of appropriate discipline in the workforce. Callaghan’s (1976) Ruskin College speech is often seen as the symbolic turning point, but the reality was that an underswell of authoritarian populism was already creating

a new political, social and educational discourse. In commenting on the English situation Apple (1993a) cites Green's (1991) identification of four major trends within the conservative renaissance: these were privatisation, centralisation, differentiation and vocationalisation. Here were the perfect conditions for technical/administrative knowledge, in line with the Lyotardian principle of performativity, to experience growth and acceptance. BEC/BTEC, taken as a kind of case study, reveals that the growth in question was achieved. The evidence for acceptance of these changes, however, despite some advances for those promoting them, reveals deep ambivalence as expressed in the views of many educationalists, employers and students (see Chapter 7). Many still see vocational education as the "second rate" option for those incapable of better.

Green (ibid.), in speaking of the "peculiarities" of English education, refers to the historic dominance within FE of the City and Guilds qualification system, with its disconnection from both HE and the academic tradition of GCSE and A Level, as partially responsible for the marginalisation of post-compulsory education. BEC/BTEC has had some success in building bridges between FE and HE, and between FE and schools, especially in business education. Many thousands of students who, for whatever complex reasons, would perhaps not have responded to A Levels have trodden the BEC/BTEC National route to a place as new professionals in the growing technocracy. That is an achievement for them and for BEC/BTEC. Others were successful in spheres which were, perhaps, unexpected when they enrolled on a BEC/BTEC National course after a mediocre school career. One former BEC



National student, now a lecturer at an elite university (which would rarely recruit BEC/BTEC students for entry to its degree programmes), explained that, “It [BEC] was a huge turning point in my life. Having not enjoyed school or the subjects, BEC subjects really captured my attention and I enjoyed the more adult style of learning.” For many others BEC/BTEC led to a sense of being “second class” and ill-equipped for the culture and prevailing learning styles of HE when they arrived, as the disproportionately high HE drop out rates of former BTEC students, at more than double the level for former GCE A Level students, suggest (see *Tables 12, 13 and 14* on p. 279).

Returning to Johnson’s (1980) suggestion that “...practical needs are best served by combining...elements from different intellectual and political traditions...” (p. 9). Gramsci (1971) placed education at the centre of his thinking about how to bring into being a better society through the building of a new hegemonic order which would be made possible by the creation of intellectuals from within the working class. Vocational education in England today, as in Italy in the early years of the Twentieth Century, is primarily education for the children of the working and lower middle classes. Now, as then, there is little sign of the injection of a critical or truly reflective component. Gramsci argued, in relation to the Italian secondary schools which had been superceded by the Gentile Reform of 1923, that,

It was right to struggle against the old school, but reforming it was not as simple as it seemed. The problem was not one of model curricula but of men [sic], and not just the men who were actually teachers themselves but of the entire social complex which they express. (p. 36)

Althusser placed the Educational Ideological State Apparatus at the centre of his critique of how a capitalist society maintains itself precisely because he



understood that the social formations which constitute it are in a state of interplay and that the maintenance of hegemony is the key to political and social power. Reproduction of the relations of production is crucial to this and the content of the contemporary vocational curriculum betrays such reproduction as its fundamental, if unstated and profoundly unconscious, purpose.

Hoskin (1990) [quoted in Usher and Edwards (1994)] credits Foucault with having "...discovered something very simple (but highly unfamiliar nonetheless) - the centrality of education in the construction of modernity." (p. 84). In fact Foucault's recognition of education as *the* instrument of governance (see Foucault 1991) effectively underscores Althusser's thesis on education. Foucault went further by investigating the micro-processes of power and surveillance. In many ways the evolution of the BEC/BTEC curriculum through to the detailed performance criteria and planning/evaluation systems of GNVQ presents a case study of the intensification of such techniques in an era where education, and not just vocational education, is increasingly at one with economic imperatives. Lyotard's (1984) account of the fragmentation of knowledge and rise of the culture of performativity provides a theory which explains the birth of the module, the death of the essay, and the tyranny of performance criteria.

At the practical level where young people have to make real choices between the option of the archaic GCE A Level system and some kind of viable alternative the BEC/BTEC curriculum must be considered as having been

fundamentally successful. It provided a separate track with a radically different mode of learning. By the early 1990s it had, following years of struggle, achieved a plateau of recognition. The BTEC National Diploma might have been positively developed by the injection of a treatment of the concept of work as a fundamental and worthy subject of academic and not merely instrumental study. By seizing on the Marxian/Gramscian/Deweyan principle of work as the quintessential human activity to be studied as a social phenomena it would have been possible to create a curriculum which was useful and liberating, practical and theoretically grounded. This would have provided an education which, at the level below the age of 19, was *about work* rather than a training/education *for jobs*. The irony is that the 1996 merger of BTEC with the well established *University of London Examination and Assessment Council* (a major GCSE and A Level Examination Board) might have formed the basis by which just such a development, with the necessary shift in educational policy, could have been facilitated. Instead BTEC was effectively derailed by the influence of NCVQ which, as an organisation, came as near to an exhibit of what an actual component of an ISA might look like than anything an unreconstructed 1970s Althusserian might have dreamed of. The BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance as an educational alternative for many thousands of students has all but gone, in 1998-99 only 839 students were registered in the whole of England, Wales and Northern Ireland (Edexcel 1999: see *Appendix D*). It will soon disappear completely. The Advanced GNVQ, in so much as it may be considered a descendent of the BTEC National, is (at least for now), a

meagre inheritance from what BTEC was, and no substitute for what it might have become.



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# **APPENDIX A**

## **Sample Questionnaires**

## **APPENDIX A - Sample Questionnaires and Key**

### **Key to Questionnaires**

A range of forms having common items, together with specific items appropriate to the particular target group(s), was designed. The forms were colour coded on the basis indicated in brackets below in order to facilitate ease of sorting.

#### **Form Q1**

This form was designed for completion by a range of teaching/lecturing professionals and trainee teaching/lecturing professionals as follows:

FE Lecturers (blue), HE Lecturers (grey) and HE Admissions Tutors (green), Student FE Lecturers (yellow), and School/Sixth Form College Teachers (white). The forms were distributed by post together with a pre-paid envelope for reply.

#### **Form Q2 (E)**

This form was designed for completion by employers (grey), representatives of professional bodies (blue), and careers advisers (green). The forms were distributed by post together with a pre-paid envelope for reply.

#### **Form Q2 (P)**

This form was designed for use by the parents/guardians of current BTEC National students (and was coded white). The forms were taken home to parents/guardians by students. Following a very poor rate of return this category was not subsequently analysed.

#### **Form Q3**

This form (yellow) was designed for use by A Level students in a traditional Sixth Form College. The forms were completed under the "invigilation" of a teacher who had been pre-briefed.

#### **Form Q4**

This form (pink) was directly administered to current BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance students.

#### **Form Q5**

This form (pink) was sent via postal services to the last known address of all cohorts (since the first in 1979-81) of former BEC/BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance students who had attended the same technical college.

**Samples of each form, for this purpose printed on white paper, follow for information.**

/

**RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE ON BEC/BTEC NATIONAL DIPLOMA IN BUSINESS AND FINANCE**

Please ignore any questions which are inapplicable or which you prefer not to answer.

1. Name:
2. Sex: M/F
3. Age:
4. Employing Institution:
5. Contact Address:

Contact Tel. No.:

6. Post/Appointment
7. Number of years experience in teaching:
8. Please tick each of the courses below on which you have taught (if any):

8.1	BEC GENERAL CERTIFICATE	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.2	BEC GENERAL DIPLOMA	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.3	BEC NATIONAL CERTIFICATE	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.4	BEC NATIONAL DIPLOMA	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.5	BEC HIGHER NATIONAL CERTIFICATE	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.6	BEC HIGHER NATIONAL DIPLOMA	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.7	BTEC GENERAL CERTIFICATE	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.8	BTEC GENERAL DIPLOMA	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.9	BTEC FIRST CERTIFICATE	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.10	BTEC FIRST DIPLOMA	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.11	BTEC NATIONAL CERTIFICATE	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.12	BTEC NATIONAL DIPLOMA	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.13	BTEC HIGHER NATIONAL CERTIFICATE	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.14	BTEC HIGHER NATIONAL DIPLOMA	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.15	BTEC GNVQ FOUNDATION	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.16	BTEC GNVQ INTERMEDIATE	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.17	BTEC GNVQ ADVANCED	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please indicate below any other experience which you may have of BEC/BTEC courses or students (either direct or indirect):



9  
(B1)

How, in your view, do employers and potential employers generally rate BTEC qualifications?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1	2	3	4	5
v.low	low	OK	high	v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

10.  
(B2)

How do you rate the BTEC National course as a practical preparation for employment?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1	2	3	4	5
v.low	low	OK	high	v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

11.

How do you think staff in your institution generally regard the BTEC National qualifications?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1	2	3	4	5
v.low	low	OK	high	v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

12.  
(B4)

How do you rate the BTEC National course as a practical preparation for higher education studies?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1	2	3	4	5
v.low	low	OK	high	v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

continued../

**13. Please briefly indicate the major strengths/benefits (if any) which you would associate with BEC/BTEC courses:**

**14. Please briefly indicate the major weaknesses/problems (if any) which you would associate with BEC/BTEC courses:**

Continued../

15. Please indicate (with brief reasons) whether or not you regard BTEC GNVQs as a positive or negative development of the BTEC curriculum:

Signature:

Date:

Please use the space below if you wish to elaborate on any of your responses above or to add any comments regarding BEC/BTEC provision and associated issues *(please use extra sheets if necessary)*:

Thank you for completing this form. Please return it to Roy Fisher, School of Education, University of Huddersfield, Holly Bank Road, Huddersfield HD3 3BP.

5



RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE ON BEC/BTEC NATIONAL DIPLOMA IN BUSINESS AND FINANCE

Please ignore any questions which are inapplicable or which you prefer not to answer.

1. Name:

2. Sex: M/F

3. Age:
4. Organisation:
5. Contact Address:
6. Contact Tel. No.:
7. Post/Appointment
8. Please indicate below any experience which you may have of BEC/BTEC courses or students (either direct or indirect):

9.  
(B1)

How, in your view, do employers and potential employers generally rate BTEC qualifications?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1

2

3

4

5

v.low

low

OK

high

v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

10.  
(B2)

How do you rate the BTEC National course as a practical preparation for employment?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1

2

3

4

5

v.low

low

OK

high

v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

continued../

6

11.  
(B3)

How do you think staff in higher education generally regard the BTEC National qualifications?  
*(please circle a number below)*

12345

v.lowlowOKhighv.high

ANY COMMENTS:

12.  
(B4)

How do you rate the BTEC National course as a practical preparation for higher education studies?  
*(please circle a number below)*

12345

v.lowlowOKhighv.high

ANY COMMENTS:

13. Please briefly indicate the major strengths/benefits (if any) which you would associate with BEC/BTEC courses:

continued../

14. Please briefly indicate the major weaknesses/problems (if any) which you would associate with BEC/BTEC courses:

15. Please indicate (with brief reasons) whether or not you regard BTEC GNVQs as a positive or negative development of the BTEC curriculum:

Signature:

Date:

continued../





**Please use the space below if you wish to elaborate on any of your responses above or to add any comments regarding BEC/BTEC provision and associated issues *(please use extra sheets if necessary)*:**

**Thank you for completing this form. Please return it to Roy Fisher, School of Education, University of Huddersfield, Holly Bank Road, Huddersfield HD3 3BP using the pre-paid envelope provided.**

9

RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE ON BTEC NATIONAL DIPLOMA IN BUSINESS AND FINANCE

Please ignore any questions which are inapplicable or which you prefer not to answer.

1. Name:

2. Sex: M/F

3. Age:
4. Name of son/daughter:
5. Contact Address:
6. Contact Tel. No.
7. Please indicate below any other experience which you may have of BTEC courses or students (either direct or indirect):

8.  
(B1)

How, in your view, do employers and potential employers generally rate BTEC qualifications? <i>(please circle a number below)</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
v.low	low	OK	high	v.high
ANY COMMENTS:				

9.  
(B2)

How do you rate the BTEC National course as a practical preparation for employment? <i>(please circle a number below)</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
v.low	low	OK	high	v.high
ANY COMMENTS:				

10.  
(B3)

How do you think staff in higher education generally regard the BTEC National qualifications? <i>(please circle a number below)</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
v.low	low	OK	high	v.high
ANY COMMENTS:				

11.  
(B4)

How do you rate the BTEC National course as a practical preparation for higher education studies? <i>(please circle a number below)</i>				
1	2	3	4	5
v.low	low	OK	high	v.high
ANY COMMENTS:				

continued../



13. Please briefly indicate the major strengths/benefits (if any) which you would associate with BTEC courses:

14. Please briefly indicate the major weaknesses/problems (if any) which you would associate with BTEC courses:

15. Please indicate (with brief reasons) whether or not you regard BTEC GNVQs as a positive or negative development of the BTEC curriculum: -

Signature:

Date:

Please use the space below if you wish to elaborate on any of your responses above or to add any comments regarding BTEC provision and associated issues *(please use extra sheets if necessary)*:

Thank you for completing this form. Please return it to Roy Fisher, School of Education, University of Huddersfield, Holly Bank Road, Huddersfield HD3 3BP using the pre-paid envelope provided.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE ON BTEC NATIONAL DIPLOMA IN BUSINESS AND FINANCE**

Please ignore any questions which are inapplicable or which you prefer not to answer.

1. Name:

2. Sex: M/F

3. Age:
4. School/College:
5. Name of your Teacher/Tutor:
6. School/College Tel. No.:
7. Present course *(please circle)*: GCSE/A Level/Other *(please state)*:

8. Please tick those of the courses below which you have heard of:

8.1	BTEC FIRST CERTIFICATE	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.2	BTEC FIRST DIPLOMA	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.3	BTEC NATIONAL DIPLOMA	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.4	BTEC HIGHER NATIONAL CERTIFICATE	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.5	BTEC HIGHER NATIONAL DIPLOMA	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.6	BTEC GNVQ FOUNDATION	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.7	BTEC GNVQ INTERMEDIATE	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.8	BTEC GNVQ ADVANCED	<input type="checkbox"/>

9. Have you ever studied on a BTEC course?  
*(If yes please state which below)*

Yes/No

10. Have you ever considered doing a BTEC course?  
*(If yes please state which below)*

Yes/No

continued../



11. Do you think that you may actually do a BTEC course in the future?    Yes/No

12. Please give brief reasons for your answer to question 11.

13.  
(B6)

How, in your view, do people generally rate BTEC qualifications?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1

2

3

4

5

v.low

low

OK

high

v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

14.  
(B5)

How, in your view, do school teachers generally rate BTEC qualifications?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1

2

3

4

5

v.low

low

OK

high

v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

15.  
(B1)

How, in your view, do employers and potential employers rate BTEC qualifications?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1	2	3	4	5
v.low	low	OK	high	v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

16.  
(B3)

How do you think staff in higher education generally regard the BTEC National qualifications?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1	2	3	4	5
v.low	low	OK	high	v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

17.  
(B7)

How do you personally rate the BTEC courses?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1	2	3	4	5
v.low	low	OK	high	v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

Signature:

Date:

Please use the space below and over if you wish to elaborate on any of your responses above or to add any comments regarding BTEC provision and associated issues *(please use extra sheets if necessary)*:

**RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE ON BEC/BTEC NATIONAL DIPLOMA IN BUSINESS AND FINANCE**

Please ignore any questions which are inapplicable or which you prefer not to answer.

1. Name:

2. Sex: M/F

3. Age:
4. School/College:
5. Name of your Tutor:
6. School/College Tel. No.:
7. Please tick below the BTEC course which you are now studying and indicate any which you have previously studied by entering the years in which you studied,

eg.   BTEC FIRST DIPLOMA   

1989-90

7.1	BEC GENERAL CERTIFICATE	
7.2	BEC GENERAL DIPLOMA	
7.3	BEC NATIONAL CERTIFICATE	
7.4	BEC NATIONAL DIPLOMA	
7.5	BEC HIGHER NATIONAL CERTIFICATE	
7.6	BEC HIGHER NATIONAL DIPLOMA	
7.7	BTEC GENERAL CERTIFICATE	
7.8	BTEC GENERAL DIPLOMA	
7.9	BTEC FIRST CERTIFICATE	
7.10	BTEC FIRST DIPLOMA	
7.11	BTEC NATIONAL CERTIFICATE	
7.12	BTEC NATIONAL DIPLOMA	
7.13	BTEC HIGHER NATIONAL CERTIFICATE	
7.14	BTEC HIGHER NATIONAL DIPLOMA	
7.15	BTEC GNVQ FOUNDATION	
7.16	BTEC GNVQ INTERMEDIATE	
7.17	BTEC GNVQ ADVANCED	

8. Briefly indicate below the reasons why you choose to do a BTEC course:

continued../



9.  
(B6)

How, in your view, do people generally rate BTEC qualifications?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1

2

3

4

5

v.low

low

OK

high

v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

10.  
(B1)

How, in your view, do employers and potential employers generally rate BTEC qualifications?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1

2

3

4

5

v.low

low

OK

high

v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

11.  
(B5)

How, in your view, do school teachers rate BTEC qualifications?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1

2

3

4

5

v.low

low

OK

high

v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

12.  
(B3)

How do you think staff in higher education regard the BTEC National qualifications?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1

2

3

4

5

v.low

low

OK

high

v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

13.  
(B2)

How do you rate BTEC National courses as a practical preparation for employment?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1	2	3	4	5
v.low	low	OK	high	v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

14.  
(B4)

How do you rate the BTEC National course as a practical preparation for higher education studies?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1	2	3	4	5
v.low	low	OK	high	v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

15. Please briefly indicate the major strengths/benefits (if any) which you would associate with BTEC courses:

16. Please briefly indicate the major weaknesses/problems (if any) which you would associate with BTEC courses:

continued../

19

17. Please indicate (with brief reasons) whether or not you regard BTEC GNVQs as a positive or negative development of the BTEC curriculum:

Signature:

Date:

Please use the space below if you wish to elaborate on any of your responses above or to add any comments regarding BTEC provision and associated issues *(please use extra sheets if necessary)*:



RESEARCH QUESTIONNAIRE ON BTEC NATIONAL DIPLOMA IN BUSINESS AND FINANCE

Please ignore any questions which are inapplicable or which you prefer not to answer.

1.

Name:	Sex: M/F
Date of Birth:	Age:
Contact Address:	Telephone:
Years on BTEC National course <i>(please circle)</i> :	
1988-90      1990-91      1990-92      1991-93	
What course are you on now (if any)? Please state below the college and the full title of the course and the year you started, eg. BRADFORD UNIVERSITY - BA (Hons) ACCOUNTING - 1990	
What is your current full-time employment (if any)? Please state below the name of the employer, type of business, the location, and the type of job, eg. ICI, CHEMICAL MANUFACTURER, LONDON - PERSONAL ASSISTANT	

2. Previous full-time employment since leaving full-time education:

Employers name and type of business	Location	From	To	Job Title

continued../

3. Full-time education and qualifications gained since leaving the BTEC National Diploma course:

Institution	From	To	Qualifications	Class	Subject

4. Part-time education and qualifications gained since leaving the BTEC National Diploma course:

Institution	From	To	Qualifications	Class	Subject

5.  
(B1)

How, in your view, do employers and potential employers rate BTEC qualifications?  
*(please circle a number below)*

12345

v.lowlowOKhighv.high

ANY COMMENTS:

6.  
(B2)

How do you rate the BTEC National course as a practical preparation for employment?  
*(please circle a number below)*

12345

v.lowlowOKhighv.high

ANY COMMENTS:

7.  
(B3)

How, in your view, do staff in higher education rate BTEC qualifications?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1

2

3

4

5

v.low

low

OK

high

v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

8.  
(B4)

How do you rate BTEC National courses as a practical preparation for higher education studies?  
*(please circle a number below)*

1

2

3

4

5

v.low

low

OK

high

v.high

ANY COMMENTS:

9. Please briefly indicate the major strengths/benefits (if any) which you would associate with BTEC courses:
10. Please briefly indicate the major weaknesses/problems (if any) which you would associate with BTEC courses:

continued../



11. Please indicate (with brief reasons) whether or not you regard BTEC GNVQs as a positive or negative development of the BTEC curriculum:

Signature:

Date:

Please use the space below if you wish to elaborate on any of your responses above or to add any comments regarding BTEC provision and associated issues *(please use extra sheets if necessary)*:

Thank you for completing this form. Please return it to Roy Fisher, School of Education, University of Huddersfield, Holly Bank Road, Huddersfield HD3 3BP using the pre-paid envelope provided.

24

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Description and Discussion of Quantitative and Qualitative Data**

APPENDIX B

Description and Discussion of Quantitative and Qualitative Data

Questionnaire Design

**Variable 1 (Gender)** required respondents to merely identify their gender by circling either "M" or "F". **The second variable, Age**, required respondents to write in their age in years. Some of the questionnaires requested appropriate "tracking information" (e.g. address and tel. no.) and "background information (e.g. previous course undertaken, number of years teaching, post-BTEC qualifications undertaken etc. etc.). All the questionnaires provided respondents with the opportunity to write about their views - some prompts were given, (e.g. "please briefly indicate the major strengths/benefits [if any] which you would associate with BEC/BTEC courses"), but space and encouragement were provided to enable respondents to express whatever opinions they might hold in relation to BEC/BTEC.

**Variables 3 to 10** were all represented within the questionnaire by items on the following basis:-

**EXAMPLE Variable 4**

How do you rate the BTEC National Course as a practical preparation for employment? <i>(please circle a number below)</i>				
1 v. low	2 low	3 OK	4 high	5 v. high
ANY COMMENTS:				



## **Questionnaire Response**

The number of responses received from the various populations sampled was as follows:-

<b>Category</b>	<b>Sub-category</b>	<b>Coding</b>	<b>Number Rec.</b>
<b>1. Educators</b>	-	<b>1 - 83</b>	<b>83</b>
	1.1 FE Lecturers	1 - 30	30
	1.2 HE Lecturers	31 - 50	20
	1.3 HE Ad. Tutors	51 - 62	12
	1.2 + 1.3	31 - 62	32
	1.4 Student FE Lctrs.	63 - 73	11
	1.5 School Teachers	74 - 83	10
<b>2. Employment Related</b>	-	<b>84 - 127</b>	<b>44</b>
	2.1 Employers	84 - 111	28
	2.2 Prof. Body Reps.	112 - 119	8
	2.3 Careers Advisers	120 - 127	8
<b>3. A Level School Students</b>	-	<b>128 - 167</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>4. Current BTEC Nat. Students</b>	-	<b>168 - 227</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>5. Former BTEC Nat Students</b>	-	<b>228 - 381</b>	<b>154</b>
	5.1 Pre-1987	228 - 307	80
	5.2 Post-1987	308 - 381	74
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>381</b>

**Variable 1 - Gender**

*(This question was asked of all respondents)*

<b>Group</b>	<b>% Male</b>	<b>% Female</b>
<b>1. Educators (All)</b>	<b>51.8</b>	<b>48.2</b>
<b>FE Lecturers</b>	<b>46.7</b>	<b>53.3</b>
<b>HE lecturers</b>	<b>56.3</b>	<b>43.8</b>
<b>Student FE lecturers</b>	<b>72.7</b>	<b>27.3</b>
<b>School Teachers</b>	<b>30.0</b>	<b>70.0</b>
<b>2. Emplynt related (All)</b>	<b>52.27</b>	<b>47.73</b>
<b>3. School Students</b>	<b>27.50</b>	<b>72.50</b>
<b>4. BTEC Students</b>	<b>46.67</b>	<b>53.33</b>
<b>5. Former BTEC Students</b>	<b>45.45</b>	<b>54.55</b>
<b>ALL</b>	<b>45.93</b>	<b>54.07</b>

**Commentary:**

This category is not considered to be significant, it was however included as a variable in the design of the questionnaires in order to present the possibility of interrogation on the issue of gender. At this stage I have no plans to investigate any aspects of gender in relation to the responses given to the questions.

The only observation I would make is that an overall balance of gender is present within the total population sampled (46 per cent male/54 per cent female) and that this is roughly present in all sub-samples with the exception of Student FE Teachers (male bias), School Teachers (female bias) and School Students (female bias).

## **Variable 2 -      Age**

*(This question was asked of all respondents)*

<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>
<b>1. Educators (All)</b>	<b>40.00</b>
<b>FE Lecturers</b>	<b>41.30</b>
<b>HE Lecturers</b>	<b>43.90</b>
<b>HE Ad. Tutors</b>	<b>40.67</b>
<b>Student FE Lecturers</b>	<b>30.27</b>
<b>School Teachers</b>	<b>38.20</b>
<b>2. Employment related (All)</b>	<b>42.87</b>
<b>Employers</b>	<b>43.93</b>
<b>Prof. body reps.</b>	<b>45.63</b>
<b>Careers Advisers</b>	<b>36.50</b>
<b>3. School Students</b>	<b>16.70</b>
<b>4. BTEC Students</b>	<b>18.23</b>
<b>5. Former BTEC Students</b>	<b>23.70</b>
<b>Pre-1987</b>	<b>26.09</b>
<b>Post -1987</b>	<b>21.12</b>
<b>ALL</b>	<b>27.87</b>

### **Commentary:**

As with Variable 1, (Gender), this variable was included in the questionnaire in order to present the possibility of interrogating the data in order to identify differences of attitude based on respective age groupings of respondents (i.e. "generational differences"). At this stage I have no plans to make such an analysis.



As a matter of record the youngest respondents were School Students aged 16 (of which there were 12), the eldest was a Professional Body Representative aged 74.

**Variable 3 - "How, in your view, do employers and potential employers generally rate BTEC qualifications?"**

*(This question was asked of all respondents)*

Group	Mean Score	SD
1. Educators (All)	2.99	.80
FE Lecturers	3.03	.84
HE Lecturers	2.80	.81
HE Ad. Tutors	2.75	.72
Student FE Lecturers	3.09	.86
School Teachers	3.40	.66
2. Employment Related (All)	3.25	.86
Employers	3.21	1.01
Prof. Body Reps.	3.50	.50
Careers Advisers	3.13	.33
3. School Students	3.00	.50
4. BTEC Students	3.35	.65
5. Former BTEC Students	3.18	.74
ALL	3.15	.74
% Ratings on scale:		
	1 (v. low)	2345
Educators	2.41	24.1046.9925.301.20
Emp. Related	4.55	9.0947.7334.094.55
Sch. Students	0	12.5075.0012.500
BTEC Students	0	6.6755.0035.003.33
Former BTEC Students	2.60	10.3955.8429.221.95
ALL	2.10	12.8654.8628.082.10

## **Statements made in the "Any Comments" box:**

**[PLEASE NOTE: The bold number at the beginning of each statement represents the code number allocated to the individual respondent within the sample. The bold bracketed number at the end of each statement represents the point indicated by the respondent on the five point rating scale - please see page 1 for guidance]**

### **Educators - FE Lecturers:-**

**4.** *"Strong image. Employers have heard of BTEC unlike some other qualifications."* **[4]**

**7.** *"Still viewed as second rate compared to A Level."* **[3]**

**9.** *"Experience as a work placement officer prior to lecturer indicates many still relate to A Levels in business environments."* **[3]**

**10.** *"Rating based on support (in the past) from British Coal, British Rail, and Doncaster MBC."* **[4]**

**16.** *"It varies with the subject specialism and also the grade of the award."* **[3]**

### **Educators - HE Lecturers:-**

**35.** *"Prefer directly relevant work experience."* **[2]**

**36.** *"I can only respond in relation to my experience in a firm of Chartered Accountants."* **[2]**

**45.** *"I don't think employers fully understand BTEC qualifications, they are still in the era of GCSEs and A Levels."*



**46.** *"Some feel BTEC's lack rigour. Bad press has affected their reputation."*  
**[3]**

**Educators - HE Admissions Tutors:-**

**51.** *"In times of recession employers use qualifications as a crude screening device to cut down on the number of applicants. BTEC students lose out."* **[3]**

**58.** *"The qualification is not widely understood."* **[3]**

**59.** *"There is a lack of awareness by employers."* **[3]**

**Educators - Student FE Lecturers:-**

**72.** *"Usually high awareness of HNC which is well respected. Not so sure about other qualifications."* **[3]**

**73.** *" College market research has shown that employers are happy with the quality of a BTEC qualification."* **[4]**

**Educators - School Teachers:-**

**80.** *"We have specific requests for BTEC students for some local vacancies."*  
**[4]**

**Employment Related - Employers:-**

**87.** *"Seems to be a trend for National Diploma students to enter Higher Education rather than enter employment."* **[3]**

**91.** *"Its a bit new and has not established itself."* **[3]**

**92.** *"With BTEC National are exempt from Stage 1 of ACIB Banking exams."*  
**[3]**

- 94.** *"I feel most do not understand how they relate to other qualifications."* [3]
- 96.** *"Employers who have experience of them rate them highly. Those less used to frequent recruiting may still feel more comfortable with what they see as traditional measures."* [4]
- 99.** *"Quite low due to very high pass rates which suggests that the course does not stretch students and lacks competitiveness."* [1]
- 100.** *"The fact that very few students fail BTEC casts some doubt over the credibility of the qualifications."* [2]
- 101.** *"Equivalent to A Level."* [4]
- 104.** *"BTEC courses have a good reputation particularly because they prepare students for work and are very practically based."* [5]
- Employment Related - Professional Body Representatives:-**
- 112.** *"Methods of assessment, emphasis on learning by doing, acquisition of transferable personal skills are all welcomed by employers seeking recruits with a broad based business qualification."* [4]
- 113.** *"Provide broad based introduction to business disciplines. Not rated by banks as a preparation for professional study."* [3]
- 115.** *"Well known course."* [4]
- 117.** *"They have a higher opinion of BTEC qualifications if they have personal contact with the local college and know about and have confidence in the standards maintained there."* [3]

**118.** *"The response of employers is very patchy."* [3]

### **Employment Related - Careers Advisers:-**

**120.** *"Not all employers actually know what they are."* [3]

**121.** *"Often not heard of them! More familiar with A Level."* [3]

**123.** *"Hard to generalise - I think employers appreciate the vocational bias but there is still some snobbery - A Levels seem a more academic option."* [3]

**125.** *"It isn't identified as an entry qualification as much as GCSEs - more usually referred to as an 'equivalent'."* [3]

**127.** *"Those with past experience of BTEC regard it higher than those without,"* [3]

### **A Level School Students:-**

**131.** *"It depends on the type of work. i.e. BTEC Construction would be relevant to become a bricklayer."* [3]

**134.** *"They prefer their employees to have some experience before they give them a job."* [4]

**141.** *"They view A Levels as better qualifications in my opinion."* [3]

**142.** *"Many people view A Levels higher due to BTEC being new compared to other qualifications."* [3]

**147.** *"BTECs are new, A Levels have been available longer. I first heard of BTEC at college, not before."* [3]

**150.** *"More informed on specific skills needed for a job."* [4]



### **Current BTEC Students:-**

**175.** *"A lot of employers who I've worked with aren't aware of BTEC as a qualification."* [3]

**180.** *"In general BTEC course keep changing so employers find it hard to accept these changes and therefore don't know which is best."* [3]

**181.** *"Not equivalent to A Levels."* [3]

**184.** *"They should know they are equivalent to A Levels."* [3]

**190.** *"People don't know enough about BTEC courses."* [3]

**203.** *"Employers I am sure would prefer A Levels not a BTEC."* [3]

**217.** *"Most employers prefer A Levels and don't rate BTEC as on a par with A Levels."* [2]

**227.** *"Not as good as A Levels."* [3]

### **Former BTEC Students (Pre-1987):-**

**228.** *"Do not think they are aware of it!"* [1]

**232.** *"Some do not recognise unless you state OND."* [3]

**236.** *"When employing I would perceive a candidate with A Levels as "more academic", most employers wouldn't have heard of it."* [1]

**241.** *"Treated as equivalent to 2 A Levels."* [3]

**245.** *"Employers awareness of any qualifications other than O Levels, A levels, HND or degree is not high."* [3]

- 252.** *"Practical experience, good relevant subjects."* [4]
- 256.** *"Employees are encouraged to take BTEC courses."* [5]
- 264.** *"Much more relevant to business than A Levels."* [4]
- 271.** *"Private industry do not recognise BTEC as highly as the public sector."*  
[4]
- 278.** *"Due to comments made by employers."* [2]
- 284.** *"They do not recognise it as equivalent to A Level - I don't think they know what it is."* [1]
- 285.** *" My employers had not heard of BTEC."* [2]
- 289.** *"For students going into the accountancy profession BTEC, for some employers, is disregarded a qualification - they rely purely on A Levels."* [2]
- 291.** *"Usually familiar with 'OND'."* [4]
- 292.** *"Suspiciously."* [3]
- 293.** *"Not as highly rated as A Levels."* [3]
- 295.** *"Many employers do not know exactly what the course is and its value."*  
[3]
- 297.** *"Most employers don't know what a BTEC is, often the comparison to A Levels is the only thing they appreciate."* [3]
- 302.** *"As it is not readily recognised (still!) the students should realise the potential of the course and inform the employer. It depends on the student's*

*ability to elaborate on the potential usefulness. Excellent talking point at interviews."* [3]

**305.** *"Useful subjects for many careers."* [4]

**306.** *"Some had not heard of it."* [3]

**307.** *"There seemed to be little knowledge or understanding of the qualification."* [3]

### **Former BTEC Students (Post -1987):-**

**309.** *"Depends on their awareness of the course and its value."* [4]

**312.** *"Accounting firms."* [2]

**313.** *"With a Business and Finance Diploma I have been able to be at an advantage over people who just studied A Levels when competing for a Business related job as obviously I have more idea of what business involves."* [4]

**316.** *"BTEC allowed me to go directly to stage 2 of Banking exams."* [3]

**319.** *"I think employers rate the BTEC qualification highly."* [4]

**320.** *"They are an introduction into the world of commerce."* [4]

**321.** *"Depends if the employer rates formal qualifications (A Levels) highly, and if they don't understand BTEC well enough - I have had to explain it at interviews."* [3]



**324.** *"Although many employers when advertising jobs request x years of experience. Can the BTEC be reformed into a 'sandwich' course providing 'hands on' experience."* [4]

**326.** *"Employers do not rate BTEC as highly as A Levels due to a lack of knowledge as to what they consist of and represent."* [2]

**328.** *"Employers tend to rate A Levels or degrees rather than BTEC qualifications."* [2]

**331.** *"I believe that the stigma attached to a BTEC course is still apparent and A Levels still rule over BTEC."* [3]

**332.** *"Many employers tend to prefer the traditional A Level approach to further education."* [3]

**335.** *"They still see A Levels and degrees as better."* [3]

**342.** *"Experience counts more than qualifications."* [1]

**344.** *"More and more employers now recognise the advantages of BTEC courses."* [4]

**346.** *"The amount of employers that rate the qualification could be higher."*  
[3]

**348.** *"I believe employers still prefer employees with A Levels rather than BTEC because it is not as widely recognised as A Levels."* [3]

**350.** *"Not given the credit it deserves."* [3]

**358.** *"Employers see that you have practical knowledge."* [3]

**360.** *"Many employers think more of A Levels."* [3]

**366.** *"Its becoming more recognised."* [3]

**367.** *"I feel that potential employers see BTEC qualifications as inadequate or lesser than A Levels."* [2]

**368.** *"Not considered as good as A Levels."* [2]

**371.** *"From my experience I don't think that BTEC qualifications are still recognised very much. Employers don't even know what BTEC stands for and what standard it is."* [3]

**375.** *"Okay I suppose but some employers may not understand BTEC qualifications as opposed to A Levels. But I believe that more employers are looking for BTEC."* [3]

**376.** *"I believe more employers are beginning to recognise this sort of qualification."* [3]

### **Commentary:**

Responses indicate that HE staff hold the most pessimistic view of how employers generally rate BTEC qualifications (the mean score from HE Admissions Tutors was 2.80), with professional body representatives providing the highest mean score (3.50). Former BTEC students, who have first hand experience of attempting to market their qualification, gave a mean score of 3.18, whilst current BTEC students were more optimistic at 3.35. Employers themselves generally held higher expectations of the reception

which BTEC qualifications might receive in the employment market than did HE academics.

Statements given indicate that there is a perception that many employers are not really familiar with what BTEC qualifications are. This point is made by several categories of respondent and a feature is that a number of Former BTEC students making this point still go on to award a score of 3 ("OK") - it is tempting to speculate that, after such a massive investment of effort, a little cognitive dissonance may be at work.



**Variable 4 - "How do you rate the BTEC National Course as a practical preparation for employment?"**

**(This question was asked of respondents EXCEPT School Students)**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>1. FE Lecturers</b>	<b>3.1000</b>	<b>.8847</b>
<b>2. HE Lecturers</b>	<b>3.1563</b>	<b>.8839</b>
<b>3. Employers</b>	<b>3.1786</b>	<b>.8630</b>
<b>4. BTEC Students</b>	<b>3.8500</b>	<b>.7524</b>
<b>5. Former BTEC Students (All)</b>	<b>3.5779</b>	<b>.7985</b>

<b>Groups</b>	<b>F ratio</b>	<b>t value</b>	<b>Sig. Level</b>
<b>1 &amp; 2</b>	<b>.018</b>	<b>- .25</b>	<b>n.s.</b>
<b>1 &amp; 3</b>	<b>.073</b>	<b>- .34</b>	<b>n.s.</b>
<b>1 &amp; 4</b>	<b>.742</b>	<b>- 4.27</b>	<b>p.&lt; .01</b>
<b>1 &amp; 5</b>	<b>.001</b>	<b>- 2.95</b>	<b>p.&lt; .01</b>
<b>2 &amp; 3</b>	<b>.019</b>	<b>- .10</b>	<b>n.s.</b>
<b>2 &amp; 4</b>	<b>1.148</b>	<b>- 4.02</b>	<b>p. &lt; .01</b>
<b>2 &amp; 5</b>	<b>. 033</b>	<b>- 2.67</b>	<b>p. &lt; .05</b>
<b>3 &amp; 4</b>	<b>1.576</b>	<b>- 3.78</b>	<b>p. &lt; .01</b>
<b>3 &amp; 5</b>	<b>.145</b>	<b>- 2.40</b>	<b>p. &lt; .05</b>
<b>4 &amp; 5</b>	<b>2.169</b>	<b>2.29</b>	<b>p. &lt; .05</b>
<b>Overall</b>	<b>7.5252</b>		

**Statements made in the "Any Comments" box:**

**Educators - FE Lecturers:-**

**4. "Depends. We run it day release tying in with a four day work placement which increases its practicality." [3]**

**5. "Research I have read indicates employers do not rate this at all highly vs. literacy and enthusiasm." [4]**

**7. "Improving but still much content is likely to be irrelevant". [2]**

**9. "Too theoretical." [2]**

**10. "Students (mature or otherwise) can obtain a wide range and diversity of skills. I have knowledge of students who have obtained career progress because of the skills obtained." [4]**

**Educators - HE Lecturers:-**

**32. "All our BTEC are founded on producing basic business skills competencies." [3]**

**35. "May be better than A Levels in a business scenario." [2]**

**36. "Does not provide practical experience, of say, AAT." [1]**

**38. "Too much group work." [2]**

**42. "I think it is likely to vary significantly depending upon the nature of the employment under consideration, but probably OK for employment in general." [3]**

**46. "Some very poor students appear to be 'slipping the net' and attaining a qualification." [3]**

**Educators - HE Admission Tutors:-**

**55. "Employers understand A Levels and degrees - not BTEC qualifications." [4]**

**61. "The variability of provision and of standards make this very difficult [to assess]." [2]**

### **Educators - Student FE Lecturers:-**

**63.** *"[It] gives a broad range of employment options. Each company works differently so a taste of many areas gives students more informed choices."*

**[3]**

**65.** *"The students do not have enough 'in-depth' knowledge of any specialist area."* **[2]**

**72.** *"Good on skills required for employment, however students are not stretched enough on workload in my experience."* **[4]**

**73.** *"Needs greater realism to business in course content. I feel it is important for staff [teaching] to undergo specific training in this area."* **[3]**

### **Educators - School Teachers:-**

**77.** *"If the course is slanted in this direction many skills can be pre-taught."* **[5]**

### **Employment Related - Employers:-**

**87.** *"Broad based content of course not always appropriate for employment also specific skills such as keyboarding missing."* **[2]**

**88.** *" Experience gained in previous companies with employees from the BTEC (or equivalent) courses was very encouraging."* **[4]**

**94.** *"My own Certificates were in Public Administration [this employer was a former BTEC student] and I feel they were not a practical preparation for the world of work."* **[2]**



**97.** *"Very good qualification of particular relevance to employers in comparison with A levels."* [4]

**99.** *"GCEs are a better guide to academic abilities which is important to us where employees are to be sponsored for examinations set by professional bodies e.g. AAT. With regard to employment defined as performance at work - BTEC should be a better preparation, but as the responsibilities of staff appointed at this level are limited - little difference is apparent."* [3]

**100.** *"The new learning methods are not well liked by the majority of our employees. There appears to be an uncertainty in terms of what is expected of them, probably due to the dramatic difference from methods used in school. These new methods mean that it is easier for lecturers to abdicate their responsibilities to support learners."* [3]

**102.** *"BTEC gives some insight into the real world and has a broad base. A Levels are no real use except for university entry."* [4]

**105.** *"We prefer A Levels for ease of understanding what the student actually has gained, plus ease of entry to Institute of Bankers examinations."* [2]

**107.** *"BTEC courses are preferential to A Levels. We accept both kinds of students and those with BTEC qualifications have an important lead over the A Level ones."* [4]

**108.** *"The skills learnt have normally been to the candidate's advantage when starting in our employment."* [3]

**110.** *"My main experience of BTEC courses is in Business Studies. Whilst these courses enjoy a fairly good reputation I sometimes wonder if it is deserved. A lot of the subject matter is too general and not specific enough. BTEC have a long way to go to successfully offer these courses to meet NVQ requirements."* [2]

**111.** *"BTEC qualifications are worthwhile and a good preparation for work since the syllabi are closely related to the relevant areas of industry and commerce."* [4]

### **Employment Related - Professional Body Representatives:-**

**112.** *"Emphasis on the practical whilst stressing the importance of underpinning theory should be encouraged."* [5]

**115.** *"We concentrate on secretaries so additional secretarial skills are necessary."* [3]

**118.** *"... the practical nature of the BTEC approach is considered to be very good."* [3]

### **Employment Related - Careers Advisers:-**

**122.** *"I think my lack of real enthusiasm is due more to the quality of the lecturers at the local FE college who have been responsible for some of my staff."* [3]

**124.** *"Varies according to the delivery (pressures on FE colleges and staff), but no concerns over course content - a very practical preparation for employment."* [4]

**125.** *"The Information Technology input in BTEC Nationals seems to be welcomed in the workplace, but students still have difficulty transferring their knowledge when in employment - you rarely get students who say 'yes' I learnt how to do that at college' - even though they probably did."* [4]

**126.** *"Work experience/practical element is highly thought of by students."* [4]

**127.** *"Students would benefit from increased input about job search and local labour markets."* [4]

### **Current BTEC Students:-**

**175.** *"A lot of groupwork"* [5]

**184.** *"You learn how to do presentations."* [5]

**190.** *"They are better than A Levels as they prepare you for real life experiences."* [4]

**192.** *"The things taught in the options are not always up to date."* [2]

**194.** *"Prepare you for real life experience."* [4]

**195.** *"Depending on the course and on what kind of job you get."* [4]

**197.** *"They give you better practical qualifications for a working environment than A levels."* [5]

**213.** *"Good experience from work placement."* [4]



## **Former BTEC Students (Pre-1987):-**

**228.** *"Fine for general preparation - not enough practical experience (i.e. what it is really like out here)." [3]*

**231.** *"Best course I have been on." [5]*

**232.** *"Became confused as to what career path to take. Suitable as a base for Further/Higher education though." [1]*

**236.** *"It would only be useful to a lecturer in Business Studies who has never worked in industry or commerce - useless to me." [1]*

**249.** *"I think the course has become more practical since I left. I liked the CMAs though." [3]*

**253.** *"There is no course in the World that can prepare you fully for the shock of work, but BTEC is a good intermediate step." [4]*

**255.** *"There is a need for more practical work environment experience." [3]*

**256.** *"It is a very practical course preparing one for employment." [5]*

**270.** *"Nothing is ever as good as practical experience." [3]*

**275.** *"The broad introduction to Business subjects has proved very useful, however this must be qualified by employers not looking past higher education qualifications/A Levels." [3]*

**278.** *"Students see it as an easy ride." [2]*

**289.** *"Gives a broad knowledge in many areas of business which has proved useful." [4]*

**293.** *"Depends on your career, has had little impact on me but was a good grounding."* [3]

**297.** *"I now use many of the skills I gained on the course."* [4]

**298.** *"The only gap in my education was the development of analytical skills."* [4]

**302.** *"It could be better aligned with real world examples. Overall, the course helped me immensely in the office."* [4]

**303.** *"Nothing on career analysis, interview techniques, actual work experience."* [3]

**307.** *"The course could include some work practice blocks in industry."* [4]

#### **Former BTEC Students (Post-1987):-**

**312.** *"Teaches business skills."* [4]

**313.** *"It was an excellent course with all the principles of business covered. When given the opportunity to discuss what the course covered and in what depth business people are often quite surprised how relevant my studies were and how prepared I am for employment in this field [Marketing] as a result."* [5]

**318.** *"Would have been helpful if placed with an employer to gain some practical experience instead of just theory."* [3]

**319.** *"I think it is an excellent start and I am happy to recommend it to anyone."* [4]

**324.** *"No basic requirements are provided (e.g. filing, typing, switchboard etc.). We are influenced by the education departments, and yourselves [colleges], into believing that when we go out into the big bad world of employment our BTEC will make us more employable (better than other applicants), well you're WRONG!! The employer would rather have an 18 year old who has been working since school, someone who can walk straight into the job and who they don't HAVE TO TRAIN."* [2]

**326.** *"BTEC gives a better preparation for work and real life situations. Working with others and self development and confidence are gained."* [4]

**331.** *"The BTEC course, I believe, gives an insight into what actually goes on in a business, whereas A Levels just concentrate on academic studies."* [4]

**332.** *"More relevant to real life situations than a purely theoretical academic study."* [4]

**333.** *"Gives you a better insight into the 'Business World' than A Levels."* [4]

**335.** *"Better preparation than A Levels."* [4]

**336.** *"It does not set you up for any job, only Banking. It would be better if Typing was involved."* [3]

**344.** *"Better than any other course at its level. Mainly because of the practical content of BTEC courses."* [5]

**346.** *"The practical nature of the course is an excellent preparation for working."* [5]



**348.** *" You are able to work both in a team and alone."* [4]

**358.** *Because the units within the BTEC qualification are so widespread and work experience is carried out, you are more prepared for employment once you achieve a BTEC."* [4]

**360.** *"I feel that the BTEC helped me because it gave an insight into a wide range of subjects."* [4]

**367.** *"I feel that BTEC are a better preparation for employment than A Levels."* [4]

**368.** *"Good skills achieved."* [4]

**371.** *A very practical course. You can learn and understand a lot from a BTEC course."* [4]

### **Commentary:**

Variable 4 in the series of questionnaires issued sought responses on a 5 point scale (see the section "Questionnaire Design" above) to the question "How do you rate the BTEC National Course as a practical preparation for employment?". It may seem reasonable to suggest that the creation of "employability" is the *raison d'être* of vocational courses, and certainly the extent to which such courses are rated effective in relation to the task of preparing participants for the world of work should be regarded as a key indicator of their perceived value.

The mean scores obtained from FE Lecturers (3.100), HE Lecturers (3.1563), Employers (3.1786), BTEC Students (3.8500) and Former BTEC Students (3.5779) were all above the mid-point category (3) on the rating scale used. This suggests that, generally, that in each of the populations sampled most respondents were satisfied that the BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance is a course which does effectively act as a practical preparation for employment. The views of FE and HE Lecturers in relation to this issue did not differ significantly (t value .25), this broad agreement was also evident in comparing the views of FE lecturers to those of Employers (t value .34), as well as those of HE Lecturers to Employers (t value .10). The views of Lecturers at both levels of the Post-16 sector then apparently concurred with those of Employers.

Significant differences of perception arise however when the views of current and former BTEC students are compared with those of their teachers and of employers. A comparison of the views of BTEC Students and FE Lecturers shows a t value of -4.27, this falls to -3.78 when the comparison is made between BTEC students and employers. Whilst the views of Former BTEC Students were not quite as positive as those held by students currently undertaking the course (a mean of 3.5779 compared to 3.8500), they were still statistically significant in the contrast arising from a comparison with the opinions of Lecturers and Employers.

It is possible to speculate that the relatively high regard which BTEC Students hold for their chosen course as a practical preparation for employment may

well be a consequence of the fact that both BTEC and Colleges frequently market the courses on the strength of their practicality and of their direct applicability to business. Some of the comments made by BTEC students contrast their chosen course to the alternative of A Levels, one stated that "They are better than A Levels as they prepare you for real life experiences", whilst another claimed that "They give you better practical qualifications for a working environment than A Levels". This preoccupation with GCE A levels was also evident in a number of responses made by Former BTEC Students, not untypical were the assertions that "The BTEC course, I believe, gives an insight into what actually goes on in a business, whereas A Levels just concentrate on academic studies.", and "Gives a better insight into the 'Business World' than A Levels." It is possible however, that despite the fact that Former BTEC students maintain a high regard for the practicality and employment related qualities of their qualification, their employment practical experience and the views which they encounter in the labour market do, in some cases, moderate their enthusiasm. One former BTEC student wrote that "We are influenced by the Education Departments and yourselves ...into believing that...our BTEC will make us more employable, well you are WRONG!!". Another suggested that "The broad introduction to Business subjects has proved very useful however this must be qualified by employers not looking past higher qualifications/A Levels."



**Variable 5 - "How do you think staff in higher education generally regard the BTEC National qualifications?"**

(This question was asked of EMPLOYERS, PROFESSIONAL BODY REPRESENTATIVES, CAREERS ADVISERS, SCHOOL STUDENTS, BTEC STUDENTS and FORMER BTEC STUDENTS)

(See Variable 10 below for the views of FE staff, HE Staff, HE Admissions Tutors, Student FE Teachers and School Teachers)

Group	Mean Score	SD
2. Employment Related (All)	2.93	.72
Employers	2.89	.77
Prof. Body Reps.	3.13	.78
Careers Advisers	2.88	.33
3. School Students	2.95	.71
4. BTEC Students	3.52	.70
5. Former BTEC Students	3.20	.74

**Statements made in the "Any Comments" box:**

**Employment Related - Employers:-**

87. *"Depends if Higher Education route is still with BTEC or not."* [3]
88. *"Although the traditional approach to education seems to be preferred in many 'older' institutions."* [4]
96. *"Very variable, especially on those courses which traditionally use A Level."* [3]

**Employment Related - Professional Body Representatives:-**

**113.** *"My experience is confined to those teaching on professional courses."*

**[3]**

**114.** *"This is due to the low performance of BTEC National students. Also lack of knowledge on the part of admissions tutors."* **[2]**

**117.** *"Like employers they like to have some idea of the standards pursued at the college concerned."* **[3]**

**118.** *"Still quite a lot of prejudice against BTEC National, especially at the older universities. New universities may be more willing to accept."* **[2]**

### **Employment Related - Careers Advisers:-**

**120.** *"I think the GNVQ will be regarded much less highly."* **[3]**

**121.** *"Varies from tutor to tutor - some not very aware of BTEC."* **[3]**

**122.** *"Several Careers Services have done surveys of the acceptability of BTEC Nat. for HE courses which are relevant. For mature students, we found Admissions Officers are usually well disposed to BTEC qualifications."* **[3]**

**123.** *"BTECs still not specifically mentioned in University Compendium for many institutions. Not directly comparable to A Level points so have to be negotiated separately."* **[2]**

**124.** *"Many still tend to value A Levels as a mark of academic achievement and BTEC as of less value - depends how in touch with the world of industry and employment they are."* **[3]**

**125.** *"The new universities seem happier with BTEC than the established ones."* [3]

**126.** *"Unfortunately A Levels appear easier to matriculate."* [2]

#### **A Level School Students:-**

**134.** *"They probably have as much respect for people on these courses as A Level and other students."* [4]

#### **Current BTEC National Students:-**

**175.** *"I have a friend who is starting university and others doing BTEC who hope to go into HE. The lecturers at universities prefer A Levels rather than BTEC."* [2]

**184.** *"But they probably prefer to teach A Level students."* [4]

**195.** *"Depends on grades."* [3]

**197.** *"I don't really know, but I believe staff will regard A Levels as higher qualifications."* [4]

#### **Former BTEC National Students (Pre-1987):-**

**252.** *"Missed first year of Banking exams due to relevant subjects."* [4]

**253.** *"It was sufficient to earn me a place at Lancaster University Law School."* [3]

**262.** *"People do not equate BTEC the same as A Levels."* [2]

**275.** *"Accepted as A Level equivalent."* [4]

**293.** *"A Levels are more recognised."* [2]



**294.** *"Basically see BTEC as a substandard substitute for A Levels."* [3]

**295.** *"They do not know what the course is."* [2]

**297.** *"Can be variable. Durham University told me to drop BTEC and concentrate on A Levels."* [3]

**302.** *"There is no conformity."* [4]

**307.** *"The course only had a weighting of 2 A Level grades B and C for university entrance."* [3]

### **Former BTEC National Students (Post-1987):-**

**313.** *"Younger staff appreciate it more than older more traditional tutors. Although it is beginning to be valued due to changes in educational policy."* [3]

**320.** *"In my experience the younger tutors seem to view the BTEC qualifications in a more positive way."* [3]

**321.** *"Not as High as A Levels are rated."* [2]

**323.** *"But in my opinion they prefer A Level students."* [3]

**326.** *"Many establishments have no regard for BTEC students. It seems easier for A Level students to obtain more/better offers than BTEC students."* [2]

**331.** *"I believe staff in higher ed. prefer A Level students. I Have experienced this during my time in higher education."* [3]

**332.** *"Many, particularly older staff, prefer A Levels."* [3]

**333.** *"The older staff prefer A Levels". [3]*

**335.** *"Not as serious as A Level." [3]*

**338.** *"On my degree the course is very similar, so the staff think I am more compatible." [5]*

**339.** *"Because they have a knowledge of the system. " [5]*

**340.** *"I think they tend to view BTEC less than A Levels in preparing students for revision. However I think they regard BTEC students as good group workers and researchers." [3]*

**346.** *"It is seen as equal to A Levels - just as good." [4]*

**348.** *"Hardly any of my fellow students had ever heard of BTEC (all had done A Levels)[Sheffield Uni. - Law]." [3]*

**358.** *"Staff within higher education suffer from a great snobbery of preferring A Level students. BTEC is considered an inferior qualification that is very easily attained." [3]*

**364.** *"Certain traditional universities are a little blinkered." [4]*

**367.** *"It depends if the staff are from HND or degree courses." [3]*

**368.** *"A Levels considered to be more traditional." [2]*

**369.** *"First of all they think BTEC is just about doing coursework and handing it in on time. Second, they think it is a disadvantage for a BTEC student to follow a degree course because their ability to study towards an exam at the end of the year is very low. I disagree." [3]*

**375.** *"But may be a poor relation to A Level."* [3]

**376.** *"I don't believe BTEC courses are accepted as highly as A Levels because they do not follow the 'traditional' theme."* [3]

**380.** *"Didn't really experience extremely positive or negative attitudes."* [3]

### **Commentary:**

It is important to consider Variable 5 along side Variable 10 below (page 0000) which asked Educators to comment on the general regard held for BTEC National qualifications within their own institutions.

The sense which emerges from statements made is not unexpected, that is that BTEC qualifications suffer in relation to the "Gold Standard" of A Levels. The greatest statistical contrast is derived from a comparison of the mean score from Current BTEC Students (3.52) and that from HE Lecturers themselves (2.05 - see Variable 10). This suggests the possibility of a considerable mismatch of perception when these two groups eventually meet in HE. HE Admissions Tutors, who are likely to be better informed regarding BTEC than the average Lecturer showed a mean score of 2.83.

The notion that BTEC courses are not properly understood is again prevalent.



**Variable 6 - "How do you rate the BTEC National Course as a practical preparation for Higher Education studies?"**

(This question was asked of all respondents EXCEPT A Level School Students.)

<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>1. FE Lecturers</b>	<b>2.9000</b>	<b>1.0930</b>
<b>2. HE Lecturers</b>	<b>2.5625</b>	<b>.9817</b>
<b>3. Employers</b>	<b>2.8929</b>	<b>.8751</b>
<b>4. BTEC Students</b>	<b>3.8500</b>	<b>.6846</b>
<b>5. Former BTEC Students</b>	<b>3.6104</b>	<b>.8426</b>

<b>Groups</b>	<b>F ratio</b>	<b>t value</b>	<b>Sig. Level</b>
<b>1 &amp; 2</b>	<b>.130</b>	<b>1.28</b>	<b>n.s.</b>
<b>1 &amp; 3</b>	<b>1.770</b>	<b>.03</b>	<b>n.s.</b>
<b>1 &amp; 4</b>	<b>8.459</b>	<b>- 5.05</b>	<b>p.&lt; .001</b>
<b>1 &amp; 5</b>	<b>2.597</b>	<b>- 4.01</b>	<b>p.&lt; .01</b>
<b>2 &amp; 3</b>	<b>1.259</b>	<b>- 1.37</b>	<b>n.s.</b>
<b>2 &amp; 4</b>	<b>7.426</b>	<b>- 7.36</b>	<b>p.&lt; .001</b>
<b>2 &amp; 5</b>	<b>1.288</b>	<b>- 6.22</b>	<b>p.&lt; .001</b>
<b>3 &amp; 4</b>	<b>1.137</b>	<b>- 5.58</b>	<b>p.&lt; .001</b>
<b>3 &amp; 5</b>	<b>.349</b>	<b>- 4.12</b>	<b>p.&lt; .01</b>
<b>4 &amp; 5</b>	<b>6.547</b>	<b>1.96</b>	<b>p.&lt; .1</b>
<b>Overall</b>	<b>18.9214</b>		

**Statements made in the "Any Comments" box:**

**Educators - FE Lecturers:-**

- 1. "Due to lack of essay writing skills and formal research emphasis." [2]**
- 2. "Very suitable for higher course in Business". [4]**
- 5. "High degree of student input focused by Common Skills requirements." [4]**
- 9. "A Levels still preferred." [2]**
- 10. "Definite progression exists for further study i.e. HNC/D, AAT, IAM and so on." [4]**

**15.** *"Excellent preparation for the degree - provided me [a former BTEC student] with the correct mental attitude and approach to work."* [5]

**16.** *"...depends on the grade obtained - a pass on the BTEC course is not equivalent to 2 A Levels - I can make comparisons because I teach on both courses."* [2]

### **Educators - HE Lecturers:-**

**31.** *"Failure to incorporate enough examination preparation/assessment is not an adequate preparation for what is to come."* [2]

**35** *"But good for grounding in assignments/projects etc."* [2]

**36.** *"Students generally of low quality, poor exam results, over-confident."* [1]

**37.** *"Good for practical work but poor for more academic aspects e.g. critical analysis."* [3]

**38.** *"I am DMS Course Leader and regard my BTEC Higher applicants as very solid".* [5]

**39.** *"Depends to a certain extent on the course."* [4]

**40.** *"Insufficient academic content/preparation for academic workload involved at degree level."* [2]

**41.** *"Such students most often apply themselves less well than A Level students but there have been some notable exceptions."* [2]

**42.** *"Mainly because of the lack of academic rigour."* [2]

**43.** *"Poor quality. Too much group assessment."* [1]

**45.** *"I think a lot depends on the higher education subject and method of assessment. BEC National is good when you move on to a course which is practically orientated."* [3]

**46.** *"Students are well prepared for the variety of assessment methods since BTEC gives them some exposure to these."* [4]

### **Educators - HE Admission Tutors**

**51.** *"Vocational emphasis tends to weaken focus on academic rigour."* [2]

**53.** *"Problems in transferring from 'vocational' to 'academic' study."* [2]

**54.** *"Not a good preparation for a degree course."* [2]

**55.** *"Higher Education still prefers A Levels. A Levels are nationally comparable, BTEC qualifications vary according to institution."* [3]

**58.** *"Students only taken with high grades (i.e. Distinctions and Merits), but are variable - some have problems with examinations."* [3]

**59.** *"Research and preparation skills at 4 or 5. Examination technique can be 1 or 2 - causes real problems for some students. Often need encouragement to analyse as well as collect data (but often the same with A Level students)."*  
[3]

**61.** *"A Level students perform much better on both degree and HND courses."* [2]



### **Educators - Student FE Lecturers:-**

**63.** *"Depends on the individual student - need to be achieving Distinctions or Merits."* [3]

**65.** *"The students do not have enough 'in depth' knowledge of any specialist area."*[2]

**71.** *"Course too easy - the students get an easy ride."* [2]

**72.** *"Encourages students to use their initiative. Lacks depth and rigour."* [3]

**73.** *"From personal experience [a former BTEC student] I found the National Diploma invaluable in continuing into Higher Education at degree level."* [4]

### **Educators - School Teachers:-**

**75.** *"Excellent for study skills training."* [4]

**77.** *"You can build in academic rigour, which the course did not really prescribe, in training students."* [4]

**78.** *"We have had a good success rate for National students entering HE although they have been asked for high grades."* [4]

### **Employment Related - Employers:-**

**87.** *"Fine for BTEC Higher - unsure about degree courses due to different emphasis."* [3]

**96.** *"Very high in a directly related field though Maths requirements in some courses demands additional work in this area."* [4]

## **Employment Related - Professional Body Representatives:-**

**112.** *"HND/C students do very well at CIM Diploma level because of the practical orientation of the exam questions. Within HE my understanding from colleagues is that these students are less well prepared for pure academic/research degrees. "* [3]

**114.** *"Courses are weak at deeper subject orientated work."* [2]

**117.** *"Depends on HE course. BTEC National not so good for preparing for academic degrees, but fine for vocational degrees, especially those developed by the former polytechnics."* [3]

**118.** *"Personally, I rank it high but then I have a lot of experience of the course [former BTEC Moderator]."* [4]

## **Employment Related - Careers Advisers:-**

**122.** *"The member of my staff currently doing BTEC hopes eventually to go to HE. He feels the skills he has learnt and the individual research done will be useful."* [4]

**123.** *"Emphasis on project work, presentations and communication skills would seem a good grounding for many courses and future employment. Some courses however may have less opportunities for continuous assessment and team projects - may be difficult for BTEC students to adapt."* [4]

**124.** *"The same study skills are needed for FE and HE, plus the ability to organise workloads and work under pressure to deadlines."* [4]

**125.** *"Tutors seem to suggest it is better for a vocational HE course than A Levels but I am not sure about Humanities degrees."* [3]

### **Current BTEC National Students**

**175.** *"If you want to do an HND which is also practical - unlike degree."* [3]

**184.** *"You learn how to do presentations."* [3]

**190.** *"I will feel inferior to the people who have successfully completed A Levels."* [3]

**194.** *"You already know how to prepare talks and discussions."* [4]

**197.** *"A BTEC gives you a wide range of knowledge for many different Higher Education courses."* [5]

### **Former BTEC Students (Pre-1987):-**

**230.** *"Very useful background."* [5]

**240.** *"It doesn't provide experience of in-depth analysis."* [2]

**249.** *"Was at the time the most practical business course - would have liked more IT application to business but I think this is now addressed through BTEC."* [4]

**253.** *"I pursued Law, Economics and Politics at university all of which were facilitated/encouraged by the BEC course."* [4]

**266.** *"I felt much more prepared for my degree course than my fellows with A Levels only."* [4]



**282.** *"Can be some shock if transfer from BTEC on to a higher course (i.e. work requirements)." [3]*

**294.** *"Some areas need to be more in-depth." [3]*

**295** *"[Highly] as did Leicester Polytechnic who offered me a place on the LL.B. (Hons)." [4]*

**297.** *"The Maths on the statistics course is extremely weak and not suitable at all for higher education." [2]*

**302.** *"Onus on self help is excellent for university." [5]*

**306.** *"Prepares better for higher level education than staying on at School due to being treated more like an adult." [4]*

**307.** *"I found it useful as you had to work on your own and continuous assessment meant that I established a good consistent work pattern." [5]*

### **Former BTEC Students (Post-1987)**

**309.** *"Natural progression on to a HND course." [4]*

**313.** *"The only difficulty is adjusting from the continuous assessment of the BTEC to the purely examination based degrees." [3]*

**316.** *"Although I only do part-time studies (Banking exams) many of the subjects I covered in BTEC also feature now and so it has really helped me." [4]*

**321.** *"Very high for the business courses, not for the other degrees." [5]*

**322.** *"Due to tutor-student relationships". [4]*

**326.** *"Many higher education courses revolve around academic studies (essays etc.) . BTEC is better for research and presentations rather than writing findings from books and remembering things."* [2]

**327.** *"You are not well prepared for standard 2000 word essay writing in a traditional way and as a consequence I have found this quite hard. "* [2]

**328.** *"From a BTEC National I would advise people to do a HND course - A Levels prepare you for a degree."* [3]

**331.** *"The course I am doing now [HND] is similar to the BTEC National which gives me the opportunity to get ahead of my A Level colleagues."* [4]

**333.** *"Gives you a better insight, is similar to the studies you do in higher education [HND student]."* [4]

**335.** *"Was good preparation for HND."* [4]

**337.** *"Social sciences are not covered - most higher courses contain these so problems may arise for some students - due to lack of it ."* [2]

**338.** *"I believe it is better for my degree than A Levels."* [4]

**340.** *"BTEC gives students experience in group work, team building and oral presentations which are important in HE. However, it doesn't really give any useful revision techniques for larger amounts of work which you are faced with at university. The subjects studied at BTEC are very relevant to any higher education business course and I feel through having previous knowledge of computers, Accounting and Marketing I had a good foundation."*

[3]

**348.** *"I was prepared for the continuous pressure which there was during my Law degree. The BTEC helped because I was used to meeting assignment deadlines. Oral work during the BTEC was valuable because it helped me overcome my shy nature. The BTEC course taught me to be more confident when working with others, I was able to charge when necessary and I could also work effectively alone."* [4]

**350.** *"Depends on the course, degrees can be very theoretical which BTEC tends to neglect."* [3]

**353.** *"Stands you in good stead for the work you face on the first year of a Business degree, however BTEC is not a good preparation for third year examinations."* [3]

**358.** *" You are better prepared for the first year than A Level students who are concentrating on new subjects."* [4]

**361.** *"It prepared me well for my Business Studies degree - most of my first year was revision of material I had already covered at College."* [4]

**365.** *"A lot of the work on HND is very different to BTEC. On the HND we are studying at degree level, we have jumped a big step from BTEC."* [2]

**366.** *"I find that I am more confident in discussions than others due to BTEC, and look at problems with more logical reason than people who have done other qualifications."* [4]

**369.** *"I would say practical preparation for work rather than HE."* [2]

**370.** *"My studies on BTEC did not prepare me for exams."* [2]



**380.** *"Gave me a basic understanding , but essay writing and Economics could be improved."* [4]

**381.** *"The course itself is good, but it does not prepare you for exams."* [2]

### **Commentary:**

The question *"How do you rate the BTEC National Course as a practical preparation for Higher Education studies?"* touches upon what has been seen as an important test of "parity of esteem" for vocational qualifications, that is their acceptability as a passport to a university education. Variable 5 ("How do you think staff in Higher Education generally regard the BTEC National qualifications") attempted to gain an insight into perceptions of status and of the impressions which individuals might hold regarding what others think, Variable 6 however directly enquires as to the respondents view in relation to the pragmatic issue of preparation for HE.

The results obtained show a clear disparity between the views of current and former BTEC students (with mean scores on the 5 point rating scale of 3.8500 and 3.6104 respectively) and those of FE Lecturers (2.9000), HE Lecturers (2.5625), and Employers (2.8929). The pattern discerned is one of a relatively high opinion of the value of their studies as a preparation for HE amongst those who follow BTEC courses, as opposed to a less than enthusiastic assessment from their teachers and potential employers.

The positive aspects of BTEC provision generally relate to the provision of independent study skills (one former student remarked that the "Onus on self-help is excellent for university."), presentation skills, and the relatedness of the course content to HE Business Studies programmes. There were concerns however regarding the lack of essay writing skills amongst former BTEC students, limited experience of formal examinations, and a perceived absence of "theory" and "rigour". As was the case in relation to the issue of preparation for employment, the "Gold Standard" of GCE A Level loomed large, with many opinions expressed by Lecturers adding a certain sense of prescience in relation to the current BTEC student's remark that "I will feel inferior to the people who have successfully completed A Levels". There is every indication that such a student will, on entering HE, not only feel inferior but will also generally be regarded as less able than his or her A Level compatriots.

**Variable 7 - "How, in your view, do school teachers generally rate BTEC qualifications?"**

(This question was asked only of A LEVEL SCHOOL STUDENTS and CURRENT BTEC STUDENTS)

Group	Mean Score	SD
3. School Students	3.13	.68
4. BTEC Students	3.52	.67

**Statements made in the "Any Comments" box:**

**A Level School Students:-**

**131.** *"It depends on the student. They are suitable to some people more than others."* [3]

**134.** *"If the people do not get many GCSEs it is good that they do want to better themselves in order to eventually find a job."* [5]

**144.** *"School teachers make BTEC qualifications sound not as good as A Levels, not as high a qualification."* [3]

**160.** *"A Levels have always been regarded as tops."* [2]

**162.** *"They don't really stress anything on BTECs."* [2]

**Current BTEC Students:-**

**181.** *"School teachers didn't advise me to do a BTEC."* [3]

**184.** *"But I think they prefer their pupils to do A Levels."* [3]

**190.** *"They are aware of the demands made by a BTEC."* [4]

**197.** *"Teachers know more about BTEC so understand what the qualification is really worth."* [4]



**205.** *"School teachers tend to recommend A Levels."* [3]

**213.** *"At school I found a lot of pressure being put on students to do A Levels."* [3]

### **Commentary:**

The mean statistical scores on this item, as might be expected, show that those who have chosen BTEC have a better perception of what their school teachers might think about BTEC qualifications than do those who have opted for the A Level route.

Very few respondents were moved to comment on their views. Those who did often referred to the A Level/BTEC status divide. There is a suggestion from both A Level School Students and Current BTEC students that perhaps they are not furnished with much information (or encouragement) regarding BTEC qualifications before they make their choice. This has become a common complaint from Further Education institutions.

**Variable 8 - "How, in your view, do people generally rate BTEC qualifications?"**

(This question was asked only of A LEVEL SCHOOL STUDENTS and CURRENT BTEC STUDENTS)

<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>3. School Students</b>	<b>2.90</b>	<b>.70</b>
<b>4. BTEC Students</b>	<b>3.28</b>	<b>.58</b>

**Statements made in the "Any Comments" box:**

**A Level School Students:-**

**134.** *"Usually people doing BTEC have the chance of doing work experience.*

*They are more aware of the business environment."* [5]

**141.** *"People tend to view A Levels as higher, even though they [BTEC] are equivalent to 2 A Levels."* [3]

**145.** *"People see it as a qualification for people who can't do A Levels - they don't know what it entails."* [1]

**Current BTEC Students:-**

**175.** *"Students I know in higher education value their BTEC more than A Levels."* [4]

**180.** *"People think A Levels are harder. Just because BTEC is taken up by a growing majority people think it is easy."* [2]

**181.** *"They say that BTEC is equivalent to 2/3 A Levels but if you have A Levels people generally rate it better."* [3]

**184.** *"They are not widely known like A Levels."* [2]

- 190.** *"People still view A Levels as the traditional qualification."* [3]
- 192.** *"People do not see the BTEC course as equivalent to 2 A Levels."* [3]
- 195.** *"People tend to think of A Levels as a good qualification."* [3]
- 197.** *"People who haven't done a BTEC don't really know what it is or how high a qualification it is."* [3]
- 217.** *"People don't fully appreciate how difficult the BTEC National Diploma is."* [3]

### **Commentary:**

The mean score derived from current BTEC students suggests that their notion of how people generally rate BTEC is more skewed towards a positive reading than that of their A Level contemporaries. Where comments were made these invariably related to the unfavourably comparison with GCE A Levels - a recurring theme throughout the categories.



**Variable 9 - "How do you personally rate the BTEC courses?"**

(This question was asked only of A LEVEL SCHOOL STUDENTS)

Group	Mean Score	SD
	3.03	.65

**Statements made in the "Any Comments" box:**

- 134.** *"It is up to the individual what they choose to do."* [5]
- 142.** *"I regard them as equivalent to 2 A Levels."* [4]
- 161.** *"I believe they suit some people more than A Levels do."* [4]

**Commentary:**

Perhaps the only interesting aspect of this statistic arises from the fact that these School A Level Students rate BTEC qualifications marginally more highly than they believe the general population do (a mean score of 2.90 in Variable 8 above as against 3.03 here). Few of these students made a statement in response to this item, those who did may betray an element of "solidarity" with their BTEC contemporaries?.

See also the comments made in the "Prompt Category" below (page 33) where A Level Students state reasons why they would not consider studying for a BTEC qualification.

**Variable 10 - "How do you think staff in your institution generally regard the BTEC National qualifications?"**

(This question was asked only of EDUCATORS i.e. FE Lecturers, HE Lecturers, HE Admission Tutors, Student FE Lecturers and School Teachers)

<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>SD</b>
<b>1. Educators (All)</b>	<b>2.90</b>	<b>.94</b>
<b>FE Lecturers</b>	<b>3.30</b>	<b>.78</b>
<b>HE Lecturers</b>	<b>2.05</b>	<b>.74</b>
<b>HE Ad. Tutors</b>	<b>2.83</b>	<b>.55</b>
<b>Student FE Lecturers</b>	<b>3.36</b>	<b>.77</b>
<b>School Teachers</b>	<b>3.00</b>	<b>1.10</b>

**Statements made in the "Any Comments" box:**

**Educators - FE Lecturers:-**

**5. "Better than RSA and C & G". [3]**

**10. "Some scepticism, but most views are quite objective. Students will be counseled to do BTEC or otherwise on quite appropriate grounds." [3]**

**Educators - HE Lecturers:-**

**35. "Lacks intellectual rigour which A Levels confer." [2]**

**36. "Not as academically rigorous as A Levels." [1]**

**38. "The usual elitism is present." [2]**

**39. "Perceptions of staff who have no experience of BTEC are negative." [2]**

**42. "The score relates specifically to staff in the School of Business, who presumably use academic criteria as the main point of reference." [1]**

**Educators - HE Admissions Tutors:-**

**51. "Generally well regarded." [3]**

**54.** *"Depends on which course the person is on - if HND OK - if degree less enthusiastic."* [3]

### **Educators - Student FE Lecturers:-**

**71.** *"Staff rate A Levels higher."* [2]

**72.** *"Staff are horrified by falling standards."* [3]

**73.** *"Because they have developed over a considerable period of time they are regarded highly by staff."* [4]

### **Educators - School Teachers:-**

**75.** *"A slow process - raising staff awareness and trying to dispel deep-seated prejudice towards non-academic curriculum. But we are succeeding!"*  
[5]

**76.** *"Varies considerably between very low and high."* [3]

**77.** *"Most have little knowledge outside the traditional academic routes and are suspicious."* [2]

**78.** *"Senior management have limited perception of the course and the work involved."* [2]

### **Commentary:**

Please see Variable 5 above.



The divide between HE and FE/schools is striking. The overall mean score of 2.90 is not encouraging for those who seek parity of esteem for vocational qualifications. One respondent refers specifically to elitism - comments made elsewhere (including those in the various "prompt categories" which follow) suggest that there may well be an element of this behind some HE perceptions of BTEC.

**SUBSEQUENT SECTIONS QUOTE APPROPRIATE COMMENTS MADE BY QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONDENTS IN RELATION TO VARIOUS "PROMPT" CATEGORIES.**

### **A Level School Students**

**40 GCE A Level students in a Sixth Form College were asked to indicate their awareness of BTEC courses as follows:**

**"Please tick the courses below which you have heard of (Sample size 40 in all cases):**

<b>Course</b>	<b>No. ticking</b>
<b>BTEC First Certificate</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>BTEC First Diploma</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>BTEC National Diploma</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>BTEC Higher National Certificate</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>BTEC Higher National Diploma</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>BTEC GNVQ Foundation</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>BTEC GNVQ Intermediate</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>BTEC GNVQ Advanced</b>	<b>13</b>

**The A Level students were then asked the following questions:-**

**"Have you ever studied on a BTEC course?"**

<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>40</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>40</b>

**"Have you ever considered doing a BTEC course?"**

<b>Sample Size</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
<b>40</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>37</b>

**"Do you think that you may actually do a BTEC course in the future?"**

**Sample Size**  
**40**

**Yes**  
**0**

**No**  
**40**

**Respondents were invited to state brief reasons for their answers to the above question. These were as follows:-**

**129.** *"I wish to go to university and do a degree."*

**130.** *"Because I feel A Levels are better qualifications for higher education."*

**131.** *"Because I want to do a degree."*

**132.** *"Its easier to get onto a degree course with A Levels."*

**133.** *"BTEC does not appeal to me."*

**135.** *"I feel that if you are able to do A Levels it is more beneficial."*

**136.** *"I thought about BTEC in the past but didn't really know a lot about them. I am now doing A Levels and still don't know much about BTEC courses. I won't consider them again."*

**137.** *"I believe that a BTEC course is not up to the standard which universities and jobs require. Therefore I would rather take A Levels plus there is very little choice in BTEC options."*

**139.** *"After my A Levels I wish to go to university in order to acquire a degree."*

**140.** *"Happy with A Levels and then onto university."*

**141.** *"Do not know what it entails."*



- 142.** *"I have never seen that a BTEC course would help me in my future career."*
- 143.** *"After A Levels it would be more sensible to do a degree course rather than a BTEC."*
- 144.** *"A levels are more suitable for me because of what I want to do in future."*
- 145.** *"I feel that A Levels are more suitable for higher education."*
- 146.** *"A Levels are better qualifications."*
- 149.** *"Because they don't sound as if you could get to university with one."*
- 154.** *"I want to do a degree".*
- 155.** *"No plans to take a vocational course."*
- 158.** *"I would rather do different subjects at A Level rather than just one at BTEC. It gives you more variety."*
- 159.** *"Because I wanted to do A Levels and didn't think about doing anything else. Also I wasn't told as much about BTEC as A Levels."*
- 162.** *"Because they don't sound as if you can get to university with them and are not as high a level as A Levels."*
- 164.** *"I would like to do a degree."*
- 166.** *"I do not want to!"*
- 167.** *"Because I decided to do A Levels and I am not tying myself down to one career area."*

## **Commentary:**

Awareness of the full range of BTEC qualifications was by no means universal - all bar one were aware of the BTEC National, but this was in a school which offers that award and knowledge of other BTEC products was very variable. It is clear from some of the responses made that certain individuals were not conscious of BTEC options post A Level and that they therefore regarded the question "Do you think that you may do a BTEC course in the future?" as illogical.

The notion that BTEC qualifications are quite simply not as good as A Levels is strongly apparent - as is a general lack of knowledge about what BTEC actually involves.

## **Current BTEC National Students**

**58 Current BTEC National Diploma students in a Further Education College (18 of whom had previously obtained a BTEC First Diploma) were asked to "Briefly indicate below the reasons why you choose to do a BTEC course:" The responses made were as follows -**

**168.** *"I did not want to study A Levels as I knew that I would not be able to cope with the heavy examinations and saw the course as a suitable and equally acceptable qualification that would get me into higher education."*

**169.** *"I choose to go the First Diploma as I didn't really know what type of career I wanted and doing this course gave me a variety of options as does the BTEC National."*

**170.** *"I choose to do the BTEC course because it had a variety of options which I was interested in, and not just one specific aspect, so therefore it enables me to learn more."*

**172.** *"Because it has a variety of subjects."*

**174.** *"This course offers a choice of subjects and it is also assessed by assignments, so you are not doing an exam at the end of the year. It is a good course."*

**175.** *"I chose this particular route as I thought it would be a better way for me to reach my destination (higher education) - making use of all my skills."*

**176.** *"It is a practical course."*



- 177.** *"Sounded interesting, good qualification if looking for office jobs etc."*
- 178.** *"The information I got about the course was very appealing and I was told by the manager of Lloyd's Bank to do the course."*
- 179.** *"I knew that the BTEC course would be based at College and I had heard BTEC courses were very good and mostly assignments given rather than all exams."*
- 180.** *"I find practical work more interesting than theory work and BTEC is assessed by coursework and not exams. You get to work with groups on interesting projects and make friends."*
- 181.** *"I chose a BTEC course because I liked the way the course is run e.g. not exams like A Levels."*
- 183.** *"Because of continuous assessment and not exams."*
- 184.** *"Because the results are not based on one exam, they are spread over assignments."*
- 185.** *"I am not very good at exams and the BTEC is continual assessment."*
- 186.** *"I choose to do this course as it was continuous assessment and not examinations at the end of the year."*
- 187.** *"Because it offers a wide range of courses."*
- 189.** *"It was not geared at one job and no exams."*
- 190.** *"I did one year at A Levels and found the BTEC course more compatible with me."*
- 192.** *"We were told there was no exams."*

**195.** *"Easier than A Levels."*

**197.** *"Because I want to go to university without doing A Levels because I don't like exams!"*

**198.** *"Based on coursework throughout the year and exams are not pressurising."*

**199.** *"It sounded an interesting course to go on and study it at university and then get a good job at the end of it."*

**203.** *"The course seemed interesting, covering many different areas of business from advertising to accounts. It also offers a chance to go to university."*

**206.** *"Seemed more interesting than A Levels and wanted to continue with education."*

**213.** *"Continual assessment, doesn't all rely on exams."*

**214.** *"I felt that it would give me a better chance of finding employment and I also preferred the continuous assessment involved with the course."*

**215.** *"Wide range of subjects to choose from."*

**216.** *"It offered more practical work instead of just theory from A Levels."*

**217.** *"I preferred continuous assessment to A Levels."*

**218.** *"It seemed the best way to further my education without doing A Levels."*

**219.** *"For entry into higher education."*

**220.** *"Because it gave me the option to keep my career options open."*

**223.** *"Because it is well noticed by employers and is a well known course."*

**225.** *"It is continuous marking and I knew I would do better in this than exams."*

**226.** *"To enhance my qualifications and get to a degree course,"*

### **Commentary:**

17 of the 37 students who responded to this item made specific mention of the advantage of continuous assessment/avoidance of examinations. It is therefore ironic that when identifying weaknesses/problems with BTEC courses many former BTEC students referred to the absence of examination experience and the problems which this deficiency had created for them in HE.

It is worth bearing in mind that the practice regarding the use of terminal examinations in BTEC courses differs greatly between (and within) institutions. In the early years of BEC relatively traditional examinations were not unknown. In the later years of BTEC National practice ranged from no examinations of any kind to "examinations" of the pre-seen/open-book/presentation based variety - traditional examinations were practically "extinct".



## **PROMPT CATEGORY**

**"Please briefly indicate the major strengths/benefits (if any) which you would associate with BEC/BTEC courses."**

**(This category was put to all respondents with the exception of 13 of the FE Lecturers, all of the A Level School Students and 90 of the Former BTEC Students)**

### **Educators - FE Lecturers:-**

**2. *"Good general overview of business."***

**3. *"They allow the students a more practical view of subjects and how they can be applied to the real world. they are more coursework based, easing problems for people with exam fears."***

**7. *"Broad range of subject disciplines - appropriate for HE progression. Assess practical skills and competence. Integration of work placement. Clear structure for progression."***

**9. *Offers students an alternative to A Levels. Allows assignments to replace end exams."***

**10. *"Students who are not confident about exams (which is only one form assessment) can achieve and produce excellent work. With a broad base in Business and Finance matters, students can, through their experiences and achievements, make a more informed choice about their career and/or study***

*path. With continuous assessment and the opportunity to re-submit work students can exhibit competence and achievement without the fear of 'failure'. Through assignment work students have the opportunity to explore topics in greater depth over the time-scale permitted."*

**11.** *"Ability for individualisation."*

**12.** *"A sound base of practical and theoretical knowledge for both employment and HE progression."*

**13.** *"A high degree of flexibility via core areas, options, etc."*

**14.** *"Students can learn at their own pace."*

**15.** *"Good broad range of subjects with what seem to be the correct core subjects and a full range to choose from for options. Well structured - logical progression. Assignments well planned, with a good range of different types of assessment. Good links across subjects."*

**16.** *"The strengths are its philosophy - if this was realised in practice it would be a very worthwhile qualification highly regarded by employers and universities alike. It also enables students to who are not naturally examination candidates to progress academically."*

### **Educators - HE Lecturers:-**

**31.** *"Links to industry/commerce. Knowledge of sources of information/IT."*

**32.** *"It enables a pathway for some students with lower academic standards to progress at their own speed and subsequently to do very well. Group work is part of the learning style."*

- 34.** *"Mixing study and practical application. Emphasis on well organised and well directed work. Emphasis on ability to communicate. Gives confidence."*
- 35.** *"More specific to business. Easier for students. Fairly impossible to fail."*
- 36.** *"A qualification for those not capable of undertaking A Levels."*
- 37.** *"Practical aspects e.g. working as a team, communication skills."*
- 38.** *"They create a highly structured environment for those students that need the structure to aid their self discipline. Regrettably, this is often the academically weaker students and hence the courses could be divisive. On balance, however, this structure is still needed and has an honourable place."*
- 39.** *"Good preparation for group work, student centred learning and using initiative. Students tend to be able to present themselves well."*
- 40.** *"Develops practical skills (i.e. cut and stick). Develops self confidence."*
- 42.** *"In my experience such courses promote valuable practical skills and other attributes e.g. teamwork abilities. The ability to relate their classroom experience to the 'real world' is also likely to be more apparent than in alternative A level course. Other potential benefits include confidence building through encouraging public speaking, encouraging individual research and a more creative approach to academic study."*
- 43.** *"Some team work preparation."*
- 44.** *"Practical. Skills based. Time management. Research skills."*
- 45.** *"Assessment methods play to peoples strengths. Group work."*



**46.** *"Varied assessment methods. Practical emphasis. Attempt to relate theory to the workplace. Courses are topical and up to date."*

**Educators - HE Admission Tutors:-**

**51.** *"Vocational/practical basis. Student centred approach. Flexibility."*

**52.** *"Vocational application. Development of research/independent study skills."*

**54.** *"Skills development. Vocational. Validity of assessment methods."*

**55.** *"Development of skills - though I think BTEC assessment of skills is stupid."*

**56.** *"Some skills training."*

**57.** *"Practical application. More employment orientated. More skills developed."*

**58.** *"Personal skills - particularly report presentation is often better from students offering BTEC National qualification."*

**59.** *"The practical basis, encouragement of students to conduct their own research, and development of often very good communication skills give them some real strengths and a useful degree of self confidence. An educational opportunity for those unsuitable for A Levels."*

**61.** *"Focus on skills. Innovative approach to teaching and learning (e.g. groupwork, project work, action based learning."*

**62.** *"Practical approach."*

## **Educators - Student FE Lecturers:-**

**63.** *"Continuous assessment. A student should know at the end of the course their likes and dislikes in the various elements of the course."*

**64.** *"Develops good time management in students. Students are able to carry out fairly long term projects. Cover a wide range of subjects."*

**65.** *"Open access. Broad based."*

**66.** *"Assignment basis provides the student the opportunity to develop their own investigation."*

**67.** *"Practicality. Encourages independence. Emphasises groupwork and team building. Allows development/ownership."*

**68.** *"Practical, work related. Variety. Student centred. Students work together."*

**69.** *"Alternative to A Levels. Flexible. Industry related."*

**70.** *"Variety of assessment methods. Relevant to employment. Wide variety of subjects."*

**71.** *"Varied content. Options wide ranging. Work experience."*

**72.** *"Transferable skills. Relevant to workplace. Relatively interesting to the student. Student centred."*

**73.** *"Practical element. Work placement. Integration of modules."*

## **Educators - School Teachers:-**

**74.** *"Development of presentation skills and research work."*

**75.** *" Students development of self reliance and ability to organise their studies (and themselves). Confidence development. Industrial awareness. Life skills development. We have found that BTEC students are better at research than A Level students because of the emphasis on life/self skills training."*

**76.** *"Enables students incapable of achieving A level to progress into Sixth Form and possibly HE."*

**77.** *"Their general high regard held by both HE and employers. The flexibility and creativity which course teams can use in coursework. the possibility of dealing with students as individuals. Communication/core skills building. The general attitude of students towards these courses."*

**78.** *"It gives students who are unable to cope with A Level studies opportunities to gain access to higher education and better jobs. Our BTEC students are much more resourceful than A Level students and work better both on their own and in groups."*

**79.** *"Students are obliged to work independently and therefore be resourceful. They must also co-operate with each other."*

**80.** *"Good interpersonal skills and team building. Confidence building/presentation work. Integration of skills across the course. Build up of staff/student relationship."*



**81.** *"Gives students the opportunity to develop at their own pace, build confidence and IT and communication skills."*

### **Employment Related - Employers:-**

**84.** *"The courses encourage a 'thinking' approach, and provide a wide mix of subject coverage."*

**86.** *"Good grounding in specific areas. Studying for two or three years to use as a stepping stone towards further qualifications. The individual gets an idea of what would be expected from further studies."*

**87.** *"Involves students in teamworking. An entry qualification to higher courses. Course does not depend on one or a few end of year exams."*

**88.** *"Orientated towards a more practical and relevant course content. That must be beneficial when one starts to work."*

**93.** *"Good basic coverage of relevant financial areas."*

**95.** *"Good basic introduction to workplace practices, finance, organisations etc. More work orientated than other 'academic' courses."*

**96.** *"Control of own workload - need to prioritise across assignments. Learning to work as part of a team. Need for continual effort not last minute cramming."*

**97.** *"Relevant to employers. Good course content. Accepted as a route for entry to professional qualifications/degrees."*

**99.** *"It is accepted by a number of professional bodies as an alternative entry requirement or for exemption purposes."*

**100.** *"They give a broad background knowledge. They enable entry into HE."*

**101.** *"Relationship with local College staff. Recognised qualification by employers, students and parents."*

**102.** *"The main strength is that it is nationally recognised and requires a disciplined approach of the students. The discipline is achieved by taking attendance and homework results into account. You cannot get through solely by 'cramming' before the exam which is possible in many courses. I would not like to see this watered down - particularly I am against dropping the exam."*

**103.** *"Their strength is that they are more relevant to the working environment than most A Level subjects."*

**104.** *"Very practical. Prepare for work. Good subject range. Use of communication skills."*

**107.** *Ideal job related qualification. Flexibility within the course. Students can advance on course with trailing subjects rather than held back if he/she fails one."*

**109.** *"Development of business skills. Good self discipline. Nationally recognised."*

### **Employment Related - Professional Body Representatives:-**

**112.** *"Practical. Personal skills development. The learning experience created by tutors. Broad knowledge covering wide range of disciplines."*

*Excellent underpinning for professional courses in HR, Sales, Marketing and Finance. Problem solving, task orientated approach to learning."*

**113.** *"Attainable. Core/options structure. Sound branding. Recognition. Dedicated course teams."*

**114.** *"Student centred learning on a practical course for the market place and the world of work."*

**117.** *"Relevance to the world of work. Provides marketable skills. Can provide vocational training which is highly relevant to getting a job. Emphasis on 'learning by doing'. National recognition. Attempt to maintain national standard."*

**118.** *"The syllabus has a bias towards practical application although the academic underpinning knowledge is not ignored. Teaching method has leant towards 'discovery' rather than direct teaching which I believe is more effective. BEC led the way in more practical assessment and this was greatly followed by the polytechnics."*

### **Employment Related - Careers Advisers:-**

**120.** *"Practical. Vocationally orientated. A real option for students not quite academic enough or willing to go through A Levels."*

**121.** *"Relate education to industrial needs. More relevant than A Levels for many students. Involve work experience."*

**124.** *"Overview of subject areas/specialism - wide ranging and offering a good basis for employment in the appropriate sector or further study. Work placements offer an invaluable and realistic taste of work, which allows*



*students to confirm career ideas before commitment to employment/further study."*

**125.** *"More vocationally relevant. Provide a broader and more varied range of subject areas to study. Prevents students having to pick narrow 2/3 A Level subjects. Allows mature students to relate their previous life/work experience. Less of an exam lottery than A Levels."*

**126.** *"Practicality. Work experience."*

**127.** *"Work experience. Practical courses. Less emphasis on exams."*

### **Current BTEC National Students:-**

**169.** *"The benefits are you learn a lot of skills in a variety of topics."*

**171.** *"Not as much pressure with exams. Good practical experience."*

**172.** *"Work skills and knowledge skills. These are strengths as well as benefits."*

**173.** *"It gives you work skills."*

**174.** *"We get work related skills as well as working with each other."*

**175.** *"In my view the BTEC qualifications open doors to opportunities which other courses wouldn't. Its a great opportunity to work with people."*

**176.** *"It has many strengths because it gives you the option to choose a career relating to what you want to do. And it allows you to work practical. The thing I like most is if there is an exam and you fail you get a chance to do it again."*

**177.** *"Learn all about the business world and the running of business."*

- 180.** *"Practical. No exams. Group orientated. Assessed by assignments. Preparation for employment. Gives you knowledge of work plus an academic qualification."*
- 181.** *"Its a good all round course which employers recognise."*
- 182.** *"Easy to understand. Good tutors. Wide range of subjects covered."*
- 183.** *"You get more experience and employers are recognising it more now."*
- 184.** *"The work is varied."*
- 185.** *"It is not as strict as A Level."*
- 188.** *"It is different from school because you are not pushed to do the work so it tends to make you more independent."*
- 190.** *"A BTEC course teaches you a range of different skills rather than one solid subject."*
- 195.** *"No big exams at end of year."*
- 197.** *"Moves me on to higher education. No exams."*
- 201.** *"They prepare you for future work or education."*
- 203.** *"The teachers are helpful and sympathetic."*
- 204.** *"Prepares you well and employers look for more vocational qualifications."*
- 205.** *"Work related."*
- 206.** *"There is more practical preparation then A Levels."*
- 208.** *"The practical work. The presentations."*

**213.** *"Continuous assessment."*

**214.** *"The course gets involved in business situations. You develop a lot more team work than A Levels as a lot of the assignments involve working as a team."*

**215.** *"I have gained many different skills from the BTEC course as a whole."*

**216.** *"Good confidence building and leadership qualities. Good group work."*

**217.** *"It gives more of an insight into real life rather than just constantly feeding facts."*

**219.** *"Gives confidence and helps build relationships."*

**221.** *"Being on a BTEC course you do not have a lot of pressure about exams."*

**223.** *"Presentations. Work experience."*

**225.** *"Discussions. Presentations."*

### **Former BTEC National Students (Post-1987):-**

**319.** *"A better understanding of practical working activities. Very considerate to students."*

**320.** *"As a means of entry into the world of commerce."*

**321.** *"Much more preparation for real working life, good for confidence, more knowledge for HE business courses. No exams!!"*

**322.** *"Assessment grading. Work experience."*

**324.** *"Report writing. Basic business awareness."*

**325.** *"Assignments count towards final grades. Case studies for exams."*



- 326.** *"Better preparation for real life. Self development and confidence in working with others. Teaching style better."*
- 327.** *"Lots of materials offered. Links with organisations."*
- 328.** *"They prepare you for the business world and information technology."*
- 329.** *"Business related/personal skills."*
- 330.** *"Compared to A Levels there is more variety in the number of subjects on offer."*
- 332.** *"High coursework content. Relevance to 'real life' situations. More enjoyable than A Levels. Encourages team working."*
- 333.** *"Gives more knowledge when entering the business world."*
- 334.** *"Working on your own. Giving presentations. The general syllabus covered."*
- 335.** *"It gives a good basic business background that students can pursue if wanted."*
- 336.** *"I liked the continuous assessment instead of a big exam at the end of the year."*
- 337.** *"Taught well and structured well."*
- 338.** *"The strong orientation around groupwork and the good variety of modules. I think its an excellent course and I would recommend it to anyone."*
- 339.** *"It gives information and practical experience for a working situation, and also gives academic experience that you can transfer to higher education."*

- 340.** *"Helps your team skills. Enables you to research projects. Subjects are relevant to higher education and can be built upon. Gives you confidence to speak out."*
- 341.** *"It gives you an opportunity to develop skills in areas where you are weak and it gives you a chance to repeat a module if you get a referral."*
- 343.** *"With regard to university I have found that the BTEC course has helped me with many of my subjects, in some circumstances with a better understanding and advantage over A Level students e.g. Law, Accounts, Marketing."*
- 344.** *"Confidence. Presentation skills. Discussion skills. Negotiation."*
- 346.** *"The course prepares you well for both higher education and employment."*
- 347.** *"Practical abilities and skills gained - able to produce correct reports which A Level students do not have - also greater use of IT than A Level."*
- 348.** *"The BTEC course taught me to more confident when working with others. I was able to take charge when needed but also felt I could sit back and work effectively alone as well."*
- 349.** *"Presentations - necessary for HE and job interviews. Allows for imagination and innovation. Encourages growth of ideas."*
- 351.** *"Good preparation for entering the business world."*
- 353.** *"Practical. Interesting."*

**354.** *"A stepping stone for entry onto HND and BA degrees. I would not have got into university if not for BTEC."*

**355.** *"Teaches a wide variety of skills."*

**356.** *"It is now seen as a good qualification for entry into higher education. Many higher qualifications recognise it for entry."*

**358.** *"Major strengths are the spread of knowledge and [the] coursework contribution. The coursework contribution is what attracted me to a BTEC qualification."*

**360.** *"The variation of work carried out on the course is excellent. The course covers a wide range of topics including computers which is really useful to learn."*

**361.** *"The subjects covered over the two years helped me considerably over the first year [at university]."*

**362.** *"Wide use of computers."*

**363.** *"The teachers were very helpful and understanding and the way in which they explain and interpret information is very clear."*

**364.** *"Continuous assessment is excellent and prepares you for the real world better than a course which is based on exams."*

**365.** *"You get into the routine of coursework and assignments. You have basic knowledge for Marketing, Industrial Relations, Personnel."*

**366.** *"Broad practical knowledge."*



- 367.** *"I think that BTEC courses are more job orientated than A Levels which probably don't even relate to each other. BTEC modules support each other."*
- 368.** *"Presentations. Communications. Coursework. End of year exams. Tutor contact."*
- 369.** *"Develops problem solving techniques. Develops time management skills to meet deadlines. Makes you think and generate ideas. Improves presentation skills. Develops working in groups."*
- 370.** *"Good for preparing you for oral presentations and coursework. Very practical."*
- 372.** *"Practical - prepares you for employment."*
- 373.** *"They prepare you for the real world. The final grade comes from both course work and exams."*
- 374.** *"Practical knowledge of business. Learn good communication skills."*
- 375.** *"Good range of skills taught in relation to outside demand. Develops team work. A student who doesn't like exams could fall back on coursework."*
- 376.** *"Very practical - can be applied to different situations. Most BTEC courses offer a number of different assessments for each subject - this gives the student a better chance of gaining the appropriate grade. Tests your ability rather than how well you can learn something and repeat it 'parrot fashion'."*
- 377.** *"Wide range of subjects."*

**378.** *"More subjects. Friendly atmosphere. Approachable lecturers. Challenging assignments. Considerable satisfaction."*

**379.** *"I feel it set you up for the workforce better than A Levels, because it gives you an insight into job satisfaction. BTEC course are continuous assessment rather than exams although I prefer this, it doesn't suit everyone."*

**380.** *"Coursework, teamwork, freedom to research and use your own determination to achieve grades. Good introduction to computer technology and presentation techniques."*

**381.** *"The only strength I can associate with the BTEC course is that you learn how to do assignments."*

## **PROMPT CATEGORY**

**"Please briefly indicate the major weaknesses/problems (if any) which you would associate with BEC/BTEC courses."**

(This category was put to all of the respondents except for 13 of the FE Lecturers, all of the A Level School Students, and 90 of the Former BTEC Students)

### **Educators - FE Lecturers:-**

- 1. "Lack of emphasis on traditional skills (3 Rs). Watering down of subject specialisation into Common skills (some of them nebulous and difficult to understand). Quality dependent on staff at individual colleges. Continuous assessment enables students to forget everything. Gobbledygook in specifications."*
- 2. "Paperwork!"*
- 4. "Often perceived as choice of people unsuccessful at academic route."*
- 5. "Lack of guidance unless you know whom to contact at BTEC."*
- 7. "Standards don't appear comparable with A Level. Assignments too heavy, too time consuming for student and teacher. Administrative work required of tutor is considerable."*
- 8. "As yet employers do not understand it and are not receptive to it."*



9. *"Employer perceptions. Student perceptions i.e. second best."*
10. *"Grading classifications are somewhat broad. Not every employer/professional body may attach value to the BTEC qualification."*
11. *"Paper work for both students and staff. Grading guidelines."*
13. *"Doubts are often expressed about the validity of grading etc."*
14. *"The lack of minimum entry requirements."*
16. *"The weaknesses are the lack of commonality between colleges and within colleges. The standards have also been put under pressure by funding pressures."*

#### **Educators - HE Lecturers:-**

31. *"Level of knowledge. Lack of exam technique."*
32. *"The assessment criteria of Pass/Merit/Distinction is much too close. Because of its lower standard in the eyes of academics it tends to be taught by part-timers. There is now less teacher/student contact hours which I don't think is a good thing for this type of student. They need more encouragement and coaxing than others."*
34. *"Tendency for students to provide quantity rather than quality. Some lack of academic depth of study. Variability of standards between colleges."*
35. *"Lack of intellectual rigour and depth. Not greatly valued by employers."*
36. *"Students led to believe that the level of work that sufficed for BTEC will be OK for higher education which it clearly is not."*
37. *"Academic aspects e.g. critical analysis, enquiry."*

- 38.** *"The tendency to force feed material discourages student independence. The 'training' emphasis is fine but a broader stripe of education should be added to the courses. This would help with later progression. BTEC procedures are heavy on 'weighing' but light on advice to tutors on process. BTEC is 'cheap' because it has not tried to improve the education/training process. This is probably wise as a 'keep costs down' procedure but eventually you get what you pay for."*
- 39.** *"Lack of preparation for academic work including production of discursive essays."*
- 40.** *"Lack of academic rigour. Internal assessment resulting in variable standards between institutions. I know of ex-colleagues falsifying results (not here). Students become more confident but they fail to know the limits of their knowledge."*
- 41.** *"The freedom of time allocation allowed in HE is often difficult for these students to adjust to. The change of culture appears to be a major shock."*
- 42.** *"It seems to me that BTEC courses do not generally provide students with a sufficiently demanding academic background to enable them to cope adequately with a typical first degree course. Basically I feel that academic 'depth' is sacrificed in an attempt to broaden the range of outcomes achieved."*
- 43.** *"Low quality work. Legalised copying. Watering down of standards. No decent maths in it at all."*
- 44.** *"Can sometimes miss out on underlying theory."*

**45.** *"Sometimes fails to give students exam practice. Employers don't fully understand what the courses are about which hinders students in their job prospects and could degrade the qualifications in the long run."*

**46.** *"Lack of intellectual rigour. Abundance of in-course assignments hinder ability to practice [exam?] techniques. Poor students appear to be obtaining a qualification due to high coursework marks offsetting poor exam performance. Difficult to identify whether coursework is students own or 'borrowed'."*

**47.** *"Broad 'tar brush' treatment of subject matter leaves important gaps in student knowledge - it also gives a false sense of confidence."*

#### **Educators - HE Admission Tutors:-**

**51.** *"Lack of consistency in standards between different institutions. Students wish to progress to degree studies but vocational nature of the course conflicts somewhat with this aim."*

**53.** *"Not a good preparation for an academic degree course involving a large element of formal assessment by examination."*

**54.** *"Quality of students is very variable - lack of consistency of standards. Lack of critical thought."*

**55.** *"Employer perceptions. Emphasis on groupwork."*

**56.** *"A lack of rigour, especially in numeracy and mathematical aspects. Continuous assessment at the expense of exams enables poor students to dictate level, pace and content of courses. Most courses therefore seem to have very little content."*

**57.** *"Assessment grades are limiting."*



**58.** *"Students from BTEC Nat. background sometimes find it difficult to cope with exams - a problem if they are on degree courses and to a lesser extent if on BTEC HND courses."*

**59.** *"Suspected variability in grading practices between colleges. Students very often have poorly developed analytical skills. Frequently insufficient emphasis on quantitative techniques. Sometimes, excessive emphasis on collecting information to the detriment of using it. 1990 Common Skills programme a real disaster. Practice of leaving unit assessment until end of year 2 difficult for admissions work."*

**61.** *"Very resource intensive. Requirements of BTEC have moved courses away from degrees (yet still seen by many as a route in to degrees)."*

**62.** *"Coursework assessment does not prepare students for degree study."*

### **Educators - Student FE Lecturers:-**

**63.** *"Not being student's own work."*

**64.** *"Assessment standards need to be regulated to a higher standard."*

**65.** *"The main weakness to me is that the course are assignment driven. Many of the assignments which I have seen have been very lengthy (one had over 30 pages) and students are given too many weeks to complete their work. Most are not mature enough to plan their time and in consequence I thought a lot of the work was inadequate."*

**66.** *"Too many assignments are set, devaluing the idea by overloading the student. Class based teaching is not that relevant to the world outside, there*

*is often a lot of pressure to teach to the assignments and not outside this narrow framework."*

**67.** *"Assessment. Making assignments 'real'. Integrating core skills."*

**68.** *"Image! Weaker students seem to be able to 'hide' when it comes to group work. Generally a lower quality of student which means overall standard is lower."*

**69.** *"Standard of teaching in some cases. Level of work. Expectations of students by teachers are low."*

**70.** *"Standards. The standards vary from institution to institution. Generally the standards are perceived as being lower than the so called equivalent qualifications. They still seem to be perceived as 'second class' qualifications."*

**71.** *"Too easy. Continual and internal assessment reduces credibility of qualification. Poor, too narrow, grading scale. Students see it as a 'soft option'."*

**72.** *"Too bureaucratic, too much paper work. Can be superficial. Teaching can be very variable. External moderation is weak. More creative thinking required to create valid and interesting work. Students more prone to copying."*

**73.** *"Not externally examined."*

### **Educators - School Teachers:-**

**74.** *"Quantity of paperwork."*

**75.** *"Stigma from other pupils/staff. Poor knowledge of what these courses are about:- careers officers, universities, senior managers in schools, non-BTEC staff, parents, pupils in lower school. Marketing is vital but resources for such limited. Funding resources for the BTEC courses themselves."*

**76.** *"Lack of consistency throughout country - high variety in standards. Pressure to take on the course from senior managers, due to financial considerations, leading to a poor level of ability (especially English and Maths skills)."*

**77.** *"Lack of prescribed academic rigour. Lack of high profile publicity e.g. in teacher training institutions."*

**78.** *"The administration for teacher is far too much. BTEC make us jump through hoops which are often pointless and difficult to justify. The management do not appreciate the extra work load involved in running BTEC courses."*

**79.** *"The administration load of staff is much too high. I have the impression that the output of work is lower, and that many students take advantage of the greater flexibility by wasting a great deal of time."*

**81.** *"Not enough help from BTEC. Wording very difficult for both staff and students."*

### **Employment Related - Employers:-**

**84.** *"In general they do not prepare students for the practical situation at work in a professional accountants. We find that students with a BTEC often struggle when they progress to AAT or ACCA courses which are exam based"*



*as they have had little practice. This will of course change with AAT now that it is more competence based."*

**85.** *"Possibly needs higher profile. Lack of understanding about what the qualification is and what it means to the individual."*

**87.** *"BTEC not seen as an academic course. In the past BTEC could be taken with a number of A Levels - now it is a stand alone qualification. Image/reception of qualification seems to have declined in recent years."*

**90.** *"There is not enough vetting of applicants to these courses."*

**94.** *"From my own experience [a former BTEC student] I could not relate any aspects covered on the courses to a work environment."*

**96.** *"Level of some areas of study may well not be adequate to allow student to cope in higher education."*

**97.** *"May narrow individual's horizon."*

**98.** *"Needs to be more relevant to the tasks performed at work, a move to NVQs based on work competence incorporated within BTEC may bridge the gap."*

**99.** *"Main weakness is that the high pass rate tends to suggest that standards are not high enough."*

**100.** *"The low failure rate means that their credibility is in doubt. New teaching/learning methods are not well received by the majority of staff and are treated with suspicion by management."*

**101.** *"Don't respond to local needs."*

**103.** *"The main weaknesses of the BTEC courses I have come across is that they are run over-crowded and a poor level of teaching at a lot of colleges."*

**104.** *"Under-rated by many. Standards need to be set higher."*

**105.** *"The interchangeability of modules makes it very difficult to decide just what the end qualification actually represents."*

**106.** *"I think that some of the tutors do not have the measure of the commitment to the students they should have."*

**107.** *"Being job related ties students to narrow path of opportunity at an early age."*

**111.** *"The course content is too broad and students cannot relate the knowledge gained to jobs."*

### **Employment Related - Professional Body Representatives:-**

**112.** *"Consistency across course is not the same. Assessment by personal tutors."*

**113.** *"Variable standards between centres. Difficulty in involving employers in moderation process. Language ('BECspeak'). Mismatch in approach providing a poor preparation for later professional studies."*

**114.** *"less suitable for the academically inclined who want to go to degree courses."*

**116.** *"Poor in communication and expression."*

**117.** *"Lack of confidence that the same standards are maintained in every college. Bureaucracy and jargon have put some employers off the scheme."*

*Prejudice in favour of A Levels. Introduction of NVQs has confused students and employers."*

**118.** *"Teaching style required is not always available from staff, some of whom find it more comfortable to teach in a traditional way. Some subjects are difficult to teach in the 'discovery' method and require a bed of knowledge. Quality control on moderation can be suspect. From my own experience, I know that moderators differ greatly on standards despite gallant efforts to train them."*

**119.** *"A major weakness was the length of time which elapsed before successful students received the certificates."*

### **Employment Related - Careers Advisers:-**

**121.** *"Getting work placements in the current economic situation. Lack of understanding of the results structure."*

**122.** *At Wakefield College, in previous years, our staff on day release felt there was too little input by lecturers (and a worrying level of absence by the lecturers). The students were left alone too much with the college computers and a virus spread from a student's disk into the local authority system. Our staff had work based projects to do in which I and my professional staff took a great deal of interest and to which we and the student (at work) gave a great deal of time. Only once has a college lecturer visited a student at work. This authority has a policy of releasing young clerical staff for BTEC Nat. - my staff frequently report disrupted classes. There is a lack of rigorous supervision of projects allowing too much casual assembly of half-read material."*



**123.** *"Still regarded as second best by secondary school staff and advisers - my 16 year old son was very disparaging about fellow pupils going to vocational BTEC courses at the Tech. Universities don't seem to welcome BTEC qualifications - Admissions Tutors don't really understand them. Therefore Careers Advisers not wishing to disadvantage those intending to apply to HE are more likely to suggest A Levels."*

**124.** *"Staff shortages etc. can lead to courses varying in quality at different colleges."*

**125.** *"Seen as more appropriate for the less academic. Not as well known as A Levels."*

**127.** *"Lack of a high profile can lead to problems, especially with parents and young people."*

### **Current BTEC National Students:-**

**171.** *"Not regarded highly enough."*

**172.** *"None."*

**176.** *"The assignments are given all together and not much time was given to do them, and when they were completed there was a period where we couldn't do nothing hardly. But I used the time to do research and gain further info from the core book."*

**178.** *"Generally not recognised by some universities as much as A Levels."*

**180.** *"No problems."*

**181.** *"The assignments come all at once."*

**182.** *"Tutors too tolerant."*

**184.** *"Teachers don't hassle students enough for late assignments and attendance and ignorance."*

**188.** *"Not really thought of highly by employers."*

**189.** *"More careers [guidance] in the first year and visits to the work place to see how businesses operate."*

**190.** *"People need to appreciate the demands of a BTEC."*

**192.** *"I think that they should teach relevant preparation for work in the outside world."*

**195.** *"Too many to list."*

**197.** *"The work is not spread over the course enough."*

**203.** *"Too many assignments. Not enough information given. Excessive time demands."*

**204.** *"Not looked upon as high qualifications."*

**205.** *"Not writing essays, doesn't prepare you for uni."*

**213.** *"A lot of work, all assignments due at the same time."*

**214.** *"I don't feel people respect the course as what they do A Levels."*

**216.** *"Reputation. Not as worth as 3 A Levels for getting into university."*

**218.** *"Sometimes too many assignments."*

**219.** *"Not as much work goes into BTEC as A Levels."*

**220.** *"The work is very repetitious."*

**221.** *"The assignments need to be more spread out giving students more time."*

**222.** *"Too many of the assignments are handed out at any one time and the study blocks need to be more interesting."*

**223.** *"Heavy work load."*

**225.** *"A lot of assignments."*

**226.** *"No work experience except for 3 weeks."*

### **Former BTEC National Students (Post-1987):-**

**320.** *"The means of assessing the course vary from subject to subject and college to college i.e. one college sets exams another doesn't. This would seem unfair and not standardised."*

**321.** *"None! Perhaps more work on IT."*

**322.** *"Assignment deadline clashes."*

**323.** *"The workload can be very stressful at times i.e. all course work being handed in at the same time."*

**325.** *"A lot of work involved and all due in at the same time."*

**326.** *"Lacks the same regard as A Levels."*

**327.** *"Lack of proper essays. Not as well recognised as A Levels. At university some people didn't even know what a BTEC was."*

**328.** *"BTEC in my experience briefly explains the whole area of the business world, but an in depth explanation would prepare students better for a degree."*



- 330.** *"I think the final exams make up too many marks towards the final grade."*
- 331.** *"The stigma which is still, unfortunately, attached to a BTEC course."*
- 332.** *"Some students tend to cheat with coursework by working together when it should be an individual attempt. More difficult to access degree courses."*
- 333.** *"Not well known yet. People still look on it as a course for people who can't do A Levels."*
- 334.** *"Lack of groupwork being worthwhile when you're in a group which seems to be losing all the work. Therefore you do all the work for a good grade or suffer because of the rest of the group."*
- 335.** *"Must continually stress the importance of good grades on assignments throughout the year to help ease exam pressure."*
- 337.** *"Assignment deadlines not firm enough. Some students could use previous years student assignments to finish own - assignments are not very different from year to year. Course units only taught to a basic rather than advanced standard."*
- 340.** *"No revision technique was given."*
- 341.** *"The problem with BTEC courses is that they may be an easier way to get to university, but having said that the problem that my colleagues and I found was that the workload was piled into one week (e.g. three or four assignments in one week plus other work would pile on)."*

**342.** *"The only weakness I can indicate is the fact that A Level students have an advantage at exams, whereas BTEC students were on continuous assessment , thus not used to the 100 per cent examinations."*

**344.** *"Not recognised enough. Could have wider choice of topics."*

**347.** *"Insufficient use of IT and standard programs."*

**348.** *"The only weakness of the BTEC was the way students were able to 'get round' the staff when they believed they deserved a better grade (after it had been marked) i.e. student is aggrieved when they receive a Merit and believe they should have received a Distinction. I personally believe the staff's mark should be final, unless there was a true grievance or an injustice which should be rectified."*

**350.** *"Merit grading band was too wide. It would help if assignments didn't come at once as you had 100 people each with 3-5 assignments due in the same week fighting over about 30 computers."*

**353.** *"Not proper three hour exams."*

**356.** *"Unfortunately it doesn't seem to be enough to get a decent job. You really do need to carry on with education after BTEC to expect to get a decent job."*

**358.** *"One of the major weaknesses of BTEC in my opinion is the lack of appreciation/recognition for BTEC. Whatever is said BTEC is considered inferior to A Level qualifications. BTEC needs to be portrayed as a serious qualification rather than something which is renowned to be a 'dossy, easy to pass' course."*

**360.** *"Too much wasted time between lessons. Lessons should be run continuously with only a lunch-break."*

**361.** *"The BTEC did not prepare me well for my exams as I had to write four essays per exam and I was used to writing reports. More emphasis on essays is required."*

**363.** *"The major weaknesses I would associate with BTEC courses is that they put more emphasis on coursework assignments, which does not prepare students well enough when entering Higher Education when they are faced with A Level type theoretical questions."*

**364.** *"Group assignments can be a problem with a member not pulling his/her weight."*

**366.** *"In order to get on a legal practice course sometimes institutions ask and look for A Level qualifications. The legal profession don't recognise BTEC."*

**367.** *"Employers may see you as inferior to A Level students."*

**368.** *"Essay writing."*

**369.** *"Unlike A Levels, to pass the BTEC all we had to do was to hand in our coursework on time and make sure we presented a good piece of work. The marking of the coursework was left to the tutor alone. I remember of occasions when an external co-ordinator [moderator] came to remark coursework. But I think it would have been better if every piece of coursework has been assessed by an external examiner. This would at least enhance the*



*credibility of the BTEC qualification in higher education establishments. (I'm not criticizing my own grades at any point."*

**370.** *"Doesn't prepare for exams. Not enough theory e.g. Economics in O/E."*

**371.** *"From my experience I think the work load is sometimes too much."*

**372.** *"BTEC courses are not recognised as as important as A Levels by employers and higher education institutions."*

**373.** *"If a person goes into higher education they are not prepared for all the essay writing to be done there. Maybe BTEC should think about this, as I personally was not prepared for writing essays and this is the main part of my degree!!"*

**374.** *"Gaining grades at certain institutions is easier than others, Every lecturer seems to expect either higher or lower standards for equivalent grade."*

**375.** *"Some of the hand in dates were too close for comfort. For example, I remember I once had to hand in four assignments in the same week. Also, some of the works are to do with group and team-work, which has the problems of assessing. Who is pulling their weight? Sometimes the group relies on one person too much while the rest are not pulling their weight, but the assessment is as a group."*

**377.** *"Lack of depth on many major topics."*

**379.** *"When applying for jobs after finishing my BTEC I found I was too qualified for junior positions, but not qualified enough for something more*

*advanced as I had no previous/not enough work experience - only the two weeks work placement as part of the course."*

**380.** *"Could perhaps prepare students in essay techniques, you pick it up easily, but when you're accustomed to writing reports it takes time to adapt styles. Languages weren't too good."*

**381.** *"The major weakness is that it doesn't prepare the person for examinations, in the first year of my degree I found it really difficult to cope and had no idea how to make notes for lectures and revise for examinations. So I believe BTEC courses should not be open book questions but in fact proper exams so that people are prepared if they want to go on to higher education."*

## PROMPT CATEGORY

**"Please indicate (with brief reasons) whether or not you regard BTEC GNVQs as a positive or negative development of the BTEC curriculum:"**

(This category was put to all respondents with the exception of 13 of the FE Lecturers, 15 of the employers, all of the A Level School Students, and 90 Former of the Former BTEC Students.)

### **Educators - FE Lecturers:-**

1. *"Negative overall. Evidence of watering down."*
2. *"Very positive. Gives students a good grounding. Is at a higher standard than Nat. Dip. Gives national grading."*
4. *"Positive - if there is a clearly defined place for them in BTEC's product mix which I don't feel there is at the moment. It should not replace the National."*
5. *"Major hurdles of perception and coming to terms with the new structure and jargon - Alan Smithers 'All Our Futures'. My research on International Baccalaureate indicates that it has a higher regard from HE and might be the same competition to be found in the 'Competitiveness' White Paper for a General Diploma i.e. worse for BTEC's future."*
6. *"Too much admin. work."*



**7.** *"Positive in that it allows the student's ability to do a job to be measured and fits in with the NVQ framework. Negative in that the unit tests are a poor means of assessment. A different method of assessing the knowledge of the student should be considered."*

**9.** *"Too early to say."*

**10.** *"No experience of this."*

**12.** *"Having been involved for only one year my opinions are not fully formed. However, I see testing underpinning knowledge as a step in the right direction as group work often masks individual performance. I am a little concerned that employers may relate GNVQs to NVQs which in many cases is not considered an acceptable qualification. I base this assumption on feedback from employment agencies and employers."*

**13.** *"I feel there is a great deal of uncertainty regarding the implementation of GNVQs and the level of them. There is possibly going to be a continuation of this uncertainty and my personal concern is for the students now taking GNVQs without the knowledge of how they will be accepted for academic or employment purposes."*

**14.** *"Positive in that it gives an alternative to A Levels."*

**16.** *"Positive - it will raise standards and comparability will bring back credibility. Negative - re-introduces examinations which may prove a barrier to students who could have coped with BTEC."*

## **Educators - HE Lecturers:-**

**32.** *"I see GNVQs as another misunderstood variant of the BTEC variety. The existing system was designed for a certain type of student i.e. vocationally based, why produce another one? More effort should have been put in to show the better sides of City and Guilds and BTEC than creating a whole new section of courses which just goes on to create more costs and less quality plus confusion by employers of educational standards generally."*

**34.** *"Negative - balance too far in direction of skills based work."*

**35.** *"Depends if these are understood by employers. I doubt if employers have properly taken on board the first system."*

**36.** *"Negative. A further lowering of standards. Confusing to employers - yet another qualification."*

**38.** *"GNVQs again create 'tick list' competencies. Education and integration disappear as the evaluation process takes over. As one insightful farmer remarked 'You can't fatten pigs by weighing 'em!' And he is right. GNVQs drag us down the 'weigh 'em at all costs' route. The use of easily obtained Government money has inevitably attracted the Managers of education to the GNVQ arena. Employers are now breaking away as the early subsidies are gradually being withdrawn. The GNVQ is the result of Tory interference with the rights of young people, regrettably often with the connivance of cross party co-operation. Most youngsters have no choice but to co-operate. The craven and morality free nature of 'bringing bums on seats at all costs' to*

*Further and Higher Education is a result of having 'Education Managers' rather than teachers set the agenda."*

**41.** *"Employers have always looked to 'someone else' to train or certify achievement...hence the proliferation of bodies awarding certificates in the UK. The GNVQ standardisation has much to be said for it and BTEC being one of our foremost certifying bodies adds credence to the GNVQ system. Such standardisation should benefit all those concerned if the required flexibility of approach can be sufficiently incorporated."*

**42.** *"I find it very difficult to answer with any confidence at this stage. However, based on the evidence so far I do not feel GNVQs represent a particularly positive development. My main criticism would be that it simply represents a further dilution of standards, and on this basis will create additional problems for students intending to use GNVQs as a passport to HE."*

**43.** *"Positive - at least there is an examination. BTEC has sunk to such depths that it could not be any worse."*

**45.** *I don't know much about GNVQs, although I would be worried that many employers may not fully understand GNVQs and may see the qualification as a Government attempt to give all young people some form of qualification, which would render it meaningless."*

**46.** *"I have certain reservations. GNVQs should raise the profile and status of BTEC which have long sat in the shadow of the 'Gold Standard' A Levels. My main reservations are in perceived poor reputation, low academic rigour, and the low attainment required in order to pass."*



**47.** *"Potentially positive, but introduction marred by problems with PC range and end of unit tests. The major problem lies in fragmentation and duplication of knowledge."*

**51.** *"Little experience of GNVQ as entry qualification yet. Portfolio/competence approach not well suited to current structure of HE (large numbers, limited resources)."*

### **Educators - HE Admissions Tutors:-**

**52.** *Positive in that there is a focus on HE relevant learning processes. Negative in that there is a dilution of vocational applicability."*

**53.** *"Positive - can combine vocational and academic study by offering GNVQ plus one A Level."*

**54.** *"As an Admissions Tutor/Course Leader I will wait and see what the quality of students turns out to be. We are currently asking for Merit standard. This may prove to be too low."*

**56.** *"A worsening of an already poor situation."*

**57.** *"BTEC GNVQs are, in my experience, the best thing since sliced bread! The skills developed and the practical/academic knowledge they stress is something all HE institutions should be aspiring to. How do we illuminate the older HE institutions to the merits of GNVQs? A question I'd love answered."*

**58.** *"Trying to keep an open mind in this one."*

**59.** *"I'm not convinced by NCVQ responses to Professor Smithers's criticisms and share the frequently expressed disquiet over the assessment process and the minimal assessment information, in terms of grades, which results. I*

*don't believe portfolios and records of achievement will fill this gap. My overall impression is that this is a negative development."*

**61.** *"From a resource point of view I fear that the approach will become too time consuming (as most process orientated approaches are). A compatibility clash looms between skills based learning/assessment and HE!"*

**62.** *"Negative - very! Far too work orientated. Not a true measure of ability."*

### **Educators - FE Student Lecturers:-**

**64.** *"Student contact time is decreased. Assessments are shortened."*

**65.** *"I believe that the GNVQs are a positive development. There is the opportunity for students to take optional additional units, and many seem to be able to take A Level subjects at the same time."*

**67.** *"Positive. Increases student centredness, increases learner responsibility, more flexibility."*

**68.** *"The main weakness is the assessment based on what you can do rather than on what you understand. I also wonder just how relevant some of the subjects are (some are extremely elementary). I like the vocational emphasis and the fact that it has an external assessment element. There's an awful lot of paperwork!!"*

**70.** *"A positive development. Primarily because GNVQs combine the benefits of previous BTEC courses with the additional benefit of external testing which helps to improve standards and therefore increase credibility."*

**71.** *"Negative. Just as BTECs are getting some recognition things are changing again. GNVQs will need to be communicated from scratch to HE*

*and employers BUT external assessment is a good idea which will give courses credibility."*

**72.** *"Positive. More access to BTEC courses. External testing. Competition increased (BTEC, CGLI, RSA). More recognition."*

**73.** *"External assessment is a positive change, hopefully becoming more acceptable as a qualification. Question marks over type of assessment carried out i.e. multiple choice. Too student centred, with a lot more student individual flexible work. Are students capable of this type of work at this age?"*

### **Educators - School Teachers:-**

**74.** *"Negative. Because of the structure and performance criteria and range the development of the student is restricted."*

**75.** *"On the negative side - unclear assessment process - some staff still struggling - but I understand NCVQ are improving things here so that knowledge areas are assessed as they were under the old BTEC. Positive side - curriculum/specs now demand a wider and deeper range of knowledge requirement. A definite improvement here."*

**76.** *"Positive - unit tests should ensure understanding of course content. I am unconvinced that students have this at present despite passing the course."*

**77.** *"Positive the way they are going. External tests will raise status amongst gatekeepers and mean students need a basic knowledge. Negative in that there are many areas to be addressed (Core Skills, grading themes)."*

**78.** *"Needs more work on it, still too cumbersome. Testing not thought out properly."*



**80.** *"Positive. Test confirms knowledge. I question the value of optional and additional units - could be seen as low status and squashed on time-table. BTEC Nat. now accepted by employers and GNVQ Business will build on this but more publicity is needed to heighten awareness."*

**81.** *"Negative - having to teach to the tests is incompatible with assignment based work. Tests were poorly thought out - can be very ambiguous. Good students could argue the validity of a number of answers but are not given the opportunity to do so. Some of the core skills, especially the number, are difficult to work into assignments."*

### **Employment Related - Employers:-**

**85.** *"Don't know enough to comment."*

**86.** *"Difficult to say, clarification on NVQs needed from my point of view. I could see the benefits of equating the level of GNVQs with the level of NVQs set within the organisation but I don't feel we are in a position to set NVQs for every post yet."*

**87.** *"Main problem is that full-time students will follow a BTEC GNVQ whilst part-time students will follow the old route. This will cause problems due to a two-tier system."*

**88.** *"Positive if a uniform/standard level can be developed across all of industry/business - otherwise just another certificate that is not recognised outside of a particular sector."*

**91.** *"Do not know."*

**93.** *"Positive because NVQs are the way forward in terms of practical qualifications."*

**94.** *"Yes, as they relate to competences at work. However employers must be aware of how the different levels relate to other traditional qualifications."*

**95.** *"Positive - standardisation for employment."*

**96.** *"Positive - qualification appears to be more rigorous than BTEC National - possibility of additionality and active encouragement of this will hopefully attract a wide ability band of students."*

### **Employment Related - Professional Body Representatives:-**

**112.** *"Overall positive - allows UK plc to compete within Europe by providing students with a good foundation on which employers can build. GNVQ Advanced better than present A Level system - allows students to go broader rather than narrower at an age when they should be widening their horizons. There is confusion amongst the public regarding levels and equivalencies. A lot of work needs to be done by BTEC in communicating the message."*

**114.** *"I regard this development as positive. If BTEC were an unsuitable vehicle BTEC courses would have to be redesigned."*

**116.** *"BTEC with professional qualification would be better than BTEC GNVQ."*

**117.** *"Negative as regards confusion for students and employers. Positive as regards vital to keep BTEC up to date with larger educational developments."*

**118.** *"I know little about GNVQs although my experience of dealing with NVQs at levels 4 and 5 makes me worried and suspicious. The NVQ is*

*interesting and must not be disregarded. It is a natural sequel to the BEC approach. However, it has not been thoroughly tested and there are many causes for alarm not least of which is that of quality control."*

### **Employment Related - Careers Advisers:-**

**120.** *"Generally they seem to be regarded less highly than the BTEC and seem to need an A Level to support them if they plan to do an HE course."*

**121.** *"Admissions Tutors have just about accepted the BTEC National Diploma and so it is likely to be hard work gaining acceptance of the GNVQ which seems to involve the student in too much pointless administration and assessment. Unfortunately I do not feel positive about the GNVQ. Is it change for changes sake when the National was just about gaining recognition?"*

**122.** *"No experience of these yet."*

**123.** *"I find them very confusing. Some feedback from HE suggests applicants offering GNVQ should offer an A Level or AS Level as well. Need for more information. If I'm confused my clients are bewildered by the appearance of NVQs, GNVQs in the local college prospectus replacing the BTEC Diplomas."*

**124.** *"Positive if allowed enough time/support/finance to implement fairly. Students and potential students are very confused by the G/NVQ standardisation of qualifications, and always seem to suffer as 'guinea pigs' in the development stage. Some concerns overall about GNVQs - already hearing horror stories of colleges/trainers 'getting all students' through to meet funding targets/outcomes, regardless of set criteria or standards. The rate of*



*rapid change in education generally is a concern, and I feel that due to increasing pressures on students and staff, standards are falling at the moment."*

**125.** *"I've never seen any publicity/academic review of BTEC Nationals and GNVQ which evaluates the two in a way that identifies a weakness with the BTEC National that GNVQ is going to put right. I haven't enough experience of students who have completed the BTEC GNVQs to identify strengths/weaknesses. I am aware that many HE institutions feel they didn't allow enough evidence of specialisation in particular subjects e.g. maths, but at Wakefield this being addressed by offering a range of additional units."*

**127.** *"Unsure. GNVQs are another term for employers to get to grips with. Don't really know yet how acceptable GNVQs are to universities until more students move into Higher Education."*

### **Current BTEC Students:-**

**169.** *"I feel there is a negative side as the name of the BTEC qualifications keeps changing, this seems to confuse employers and students."*

**171.** *"Negative, they aren't academic enough."*

**172.** *"I'm not sure because I don't know enough about GNVQs."*

**173.** *"I don't have much knowledge on GNVQs."*

**176.** *"I think that changes are required because as time moves on education should as well."*

**179.** *"Positive development of the BTEC curriculum. I they are a good experience."*

**189.** *"There is not much difference between the two courses, so positive."*

**195.** *"Don't know, don't care."*

**216.** *"Have not researched the new GNVQs".*

**220.** *"I do not know what the GNVQs are like."*

**225.** *"Positive development."*

**Former BTEC Students (Post-1987):-**

**320.** *"I have had no experience of them."*

**321.** *"I don't like the idea, I think universities and employers don't rate NVQs enough. I know somebody who completed the BTEC National with good grades, but it was called a GNVQ and he went to the G-Mex university fair and was turned down. They didn't want to know! Perhaps people need to be more informed about them, especially higher education lecturers and employers."*

**325.** *"Don't know."*

**326.** *"BTEC is a positive development and a better way of teaching and learning for a different range of pupils. If BTEC qualifications had the same respect as A levels they would be a more popular route of education."*

**328.** *"I do not know what the difference is."*

**329.** *"I don't really have an 'in-depth knowledge of how this development has been incorporated into the BTEC curriculum. Generally speaking, the introduction of such vocational qualifications can only be a good thing."*

- 330.** *"I don't really know much about GNVQs but I think that it is a good thing that the same type of qualification e.g. BTEC + A Levels aren't regarded as being better than the other, but I do think that BTEC and A Level should continue to be separate qualifications."*
- 331.** *"Definitely a positive development of the BTEC curriculum."*
- 339.** *"Don't know what they are."*
- 345.** *"Positive, as its more practical."*
- 350.** *"What are GNVQs?"*
- 353.** *"Unsure what GNVQs are."*
- 356.** *"Positive as it will allow more and more people to experience BTEC."*
- 363.** *"I think that the BTEC GNVQs are a negative development of the BTEC curriculum. To start with I do not think they will last as long as the actual BTEC, they may face rejection from Higher Education as they become more workplace orientated. It will also mean more paperwork for BTEC lecturers and less time for teacher and student discussions."*
- 366.** *"Don't understand."*
- 367.** *"Don't know what BTEC GNVQs are."*
- 372.** *"I can not comment on this as I do not know what GNVQ stands for or what relation it has with the BTEC curriculum."*
- 374.** *"No knowledge of GNVQs."*



**377.** *"If it raises the awareness of employers about the BTEC qualifications, without changing the course too much, then it should be a positive development."*

## PROMPT CATEGORY

**"Any other comments".**

**All respondents were invited to add any comments which they might wish to make in addition to those which they had made in relation to the various questions within the questionnaires. These were as follows:-**

### **Educators - FE Lecturers:-**

**1.** *"BTEC is generally a good thing and is certainly more flexible than A Levels. But, BTEC is supposed to be employer linked but where is the evidence of employer links."*

**13.** *"Doubts are often expressed about the validity of grading etc."*

### **Educators - HE Lecturers:-**

**33.** *"I have only dealt with BTEC students applying for ACCA Level 2 courses. Their ability is extremely variable dependent upon the institution the student attended."*

**37.** *"The BTEC students we get on the degree are generally OK until the third year where their degree classifications are generally lower than students who have equally applies themselves."*

### **Educators - School Teachers:-**

**77.** *"A specific comment. Our school has almost 100 per cent Bangladeshi female students. These courses have really helped many of them into university - where they are now doing more than survive. The course has allowed a much wider remit in our academic and pastoral care - which has countered the negative forces they have to live with."*

**80.** *"Equivalence to A Levels needs stressing in schools, the Head of Curriculum needs convincing of the value as an alternative to the traditional curriculum. It would also be helpful if time allocations were stated by BTEC."*

### **Employment Related - Employers:-**

**91.** *"More needs to be done to inform we oldies who did A Levels and degrees what all these new fangled qualifications actually mean."*

### **Employment Related - Professional Body Representatives:-**

**114.** *"This Institute [Institute of Public Service Administrators] is interested in BTEC/NVQ development issues since we are not an examining body. Our basic qualification for membership is an appropriate BTEC Higher Certificate or Diploma."*

**116.** *"BTEC students should be advised to study for professional qualifications."*

**117.** *"The Institute [Chartered Insurance Institute] co-operated with BTEC in the development of First and National level options as part of Business and Finance. These have been used successfully for a number of years."*

**118.** *"I believed that BEC and then BTEC was an amazing innovation which has had far reaching effects in further and higher education. Despite the*



*growing pains and worries over standards it has been largely accepted. The natural sequel of NVQs had to come but it has been handled badly - running before walked. Quality control is a problem. It is almost impossible to handle industrial testing of competency at levels 4 and 5. From a professional angle, NVQ can only really test what a person is now doing rather than what they hope to achieve. A professional body is concerned with the next stage of promotion - not the present stage. There are great difficulties for the unemployed and those in small firms. I worry if BTEC goes too far down this road because of Government pressure."*

### **Employment Representatives - Careers Advisers:-**

**124.** *"Having worked as a Careers Officer with young people and adults for 8 years now, BTEC has always been viewed as of a good standard, a widely recognised qualification, offering a good balance of vocational skills limited to specific areas of employment. NVQs/GNVQs are a good standardisation in theory but I already have concerns about the development and implementation - some colleges and trainers seem to be abusing the assessment process to get students through when, they do not possess the necessary skills, merely to meet set targets. I feel that the philosophy behind education as a measure of personal development and progression is being lost due to the pressures of the labour market. I suspect that BTEC are, or soon will be, losing their hard won reputation as financial pressures dictate educational excellence."*

**125.** *"I feel very confused about the new developments and the way in which they are being marketed to students - I haven't seen anything directed*

*towards employers which actual explains what they are. All the publicity material from awarding bodies looks very good but never says anything. Obviously in a period of transition there is bound to be confusion, just as BTEC National was beginning to be something people could relate to it is being replaced - some people still refer to the BTEC National as the OND so by the year 2000 they may have latched onto the GNVQ."*

### **A Level School Students:-**

**135.** *"I don't really know what a BTEC is."*

### **Former BTEC Students (Pre-1987):-**

**230.** *"As an employer [now running own company] I would look more favourably on a job applicant with BTEC qualifications."*

**252.** *"Very good course. A good education for any career in industry/commerce."*

**262.** *"My BEC Nat. in Business was an excellent all round practical course. I would do the same again with no regrets."*

**264.** *"Best move I ever made!"*

**281.** *"The course gave me a good foundation to build on when I started working."*

**291.** *"More emphasis should be given to the office environment. Administration in Business was an excellent class which I found very useful."*

**294.** *"Overall an excellent course."*

**302.** *"Could not have made a better choice."*

**306.** *"I did not regret my two years."*

**Former BTEC Students (Pre-1987):-**

**332.** *"I would strongly recommend BTEC courses, particularly to someone seeking an alternative to A Level courses, mainly because the assessment is not heavily based on examinations."*

**340.** *"Although I feel BTEC doesn't give very good revision techniques for exams, I do not wish I had done A Levels as an alternative. The skills BTEC gives a student are essential and from doing a BTEC I would say that I have much more confidence in researching and speaking to people than I would have if I had done A Levels. BTEC helps in the social side of Higher Education because it develops your listening and group interaction skills."*

**341.** *"For my experience I studied BTEC I noticed that some of the teachers were not prepared for the lessons and came into the lessons and told us to read a book. Overall, I think BTEC is a great opportunity and anybody could benefit if they wanted to, I certainly did. I choose BTEC because I was no good at exams and also it helped me to pursue a clear picture for my future. I would recommend this to anybody."*

**344.** *"I feel that BTEC students have advantages when it comes to going for job interviews as you are always asked why you chose BTEC and not A Levels."*

**348.** *"I believe the BTEC course is an excellent course. I have learned new and much valued skills."*



**369.** *"Personally I would disagree with anyone saying that BTEC is inferior to A Level. I can see myself developing skills I acquired from BTEC while doing coursework but I get surpassed by other students when it comes to exams which count for two thirds of the marks. Anyway, I think BTEC has been one of my worthwhile experiences which I'll treasure for life."*

**372.** *"I enjoyed my BTEC course and found it helpful to my present employment."*

**379.** *"I feel employers need to be told more about BTEC qualifications because I felt when I was applying for jobs after college they didn't fully recognise what they were and what level they were at. I enjoyed the BTEC course and learned a lot about the business world. I am thinking about taking a higher level BTEC course in the future."*

## **APPENDIX C**

**Interview of John Sellars OBE, Chief Executive of BTEC, Conducted by  
Roy Fisher at BTEC Head Office, Central House, Upper Woburn Place,  
London on 25 January 1994**

## APPENDIX C

**Interview of John Sellars OBE, Chief Executive of BTEC, conducted by Roy Fisher at BTEC Head Office, Central House, Upper Woburn Place, London on 25 January 1994**

[The following interview was tape recorded and transcribed with some minimal grammatical editing to facilitate the transition from speech to text. Only certain procedural preliminaries and post formal interview discussion have been omitted from what appears below].

**RF:** *My own background I think I've more or less covered in the details which I sent on to you, but primarily my experience is based in FE - teaching Business Studies on the BEC side of the BEC/TEC marriage.*

**JS:** I've been pressed, over the last few weeks, to do something on the history of BEC and BTEC. I'm very reluctant to do it because you need archive material, you need an objective approach, and obviously I've been too deeply involved. The reason I'm starting here is, if you and your supervisor agreed, it would be very helpful if a copy of your thesis could be lodged with BTEC. People may or may not agree with what you write but it would be there. I've no doubt that my successor would pay to cover the cost of an extra copy for that purpose.

**RF:** *Certainly I would be very happy to provide a copy on that basis.*

**JS:** I just thought if we cleared that at the beginning then I wouldn't forget.



**RF:** *Okay. Because I'm at the start of this project I'm not quite sure what direction it's going to take. I envisage it as a socio-historical study and I expect to do a lot of talking to students and ex-students. Nonetheless I feel a need to look at some of the official documents and the way the institution emerged. I think I should say at the beginning that I think that BEC, and then BTEC, have been an enormous staff development vehicle within FE. When I started in 1978 we were very much in the "Stone Age" with business courses assessed primarily through essays, the titles of which were sometimes "dreamed up on the hoof". We often had no real assessment criteria and BEC changed all that, which was a very positive contribution.*

*I have worked as a BTEC Co-ordinator, I worked with many BTEC Moderators and BTEC students - one of the things which came to pre-occupy me over the years was what I saw as a kind of prejudice which my students were encountering as they went out, particularly those trying to enter HE. It's this whole question of parity of esteem, and obviously the problem is deeply rooted culturally. But one of the things which I saw in the foreword to BEC's First Policy Statement by John Bruce Lockhart in March 1978 was, in the first sentence that "BEC is not concerned with the limited world of the business school graduate, the brilliant specialist or the outstanding scholar. Its purpose is to raise the standard of education in business studies for the very large number of those who make British business work." When I saw that I was very disappointed, it seemed to be saying that if you were bright then BEC was not for you. I wondered if you had seen that and if you had any reflection on it.*

**JS:** As the saying goes “I was there”. For the first year or so of my employment from November ‘74 I was the only employee so I was called “The Chief” but it begged a lot of questions. What John Bruce Lockhart was trying to get over, was that 60 per cent of the people in this country have considerable latent talents, and can do more in their own, their employers’, and the nation’s interest provided we can draw those talents out and develop them. 20 per cent of the people are turned on by mental exercises, for example GCE A Level, and another 20 per cent , for a variety of reasons, are turned on solely by manual and repetitive things. In the main the 60 per cent in the middle are neither turned off by an academic approach nor turned off by a manual approach. They are motivated/inspired by seeing *why* they have to have knowledge and understanding - because they can actually use it in some way.

When John talked about the “Engine Room” of British business he was talking about the 60 per cent. We still have the problem today that it is easier for politicians and parents, whatever their socio-economic background, to focus on the high-flier or those with very little academic ability - its because you can focus more easily on something at the extremes. We at BEC, and now BTEC, are talking about the vast range of people who are between these extremes. John was a distinguished career diplomat who was in 1978 at the City University Business School. The point he wished to stress was that everybody looked after the type of people at the top of the intellectual

pyramid. His phraseology, taken cold, could be misinterpreted - I hope that you don't do that.

**RF:** *One of the strong features of BEC, and subsequently BTEC, was the emphasis on integration and blurring of the "false" boundaries of "subjects" which tend not to appear in the world of business but which do not appear in colleges and schools. I wondered if the logic of GNVQ might mitigate against integration?*

**JS:** Can I just unpick that? I read your research proposal - first of all it was baffling and, secondly, it was humbling - because yes we did do research, but we always had to keep our eye on the ball. It might seem mundane but we also had to be pragmatic - worldly wise. When BEC was founded there were ONCs and Ds, and HNCs and Ds in Business Studies, in Distribution, and there was a Certificate in Office Studies from which the BEC General eventually took over. Now, in the courses for each of those qualifications the parts were called "subjects". As a lecturer you got more kudos, more standing with your peers, if you were a subject specialist and taught your subject at a high level. As part of the Haslegrave Report, which was instrumental in setting up BEC, the comment was made that the employment related programmes were too much in the hands of the academics. Whereas that was not a bad thing in itself, for example, we found that the OND in Business Studies included the right Economics (and more), there was the right Law (and more), the right Statistics (and more), and the right Accounting (and more). But they were each taught by specialists who rarely talked to one another, and hardly



ever thought about how, in combination, their subjects would be applied to a real problem. They all illustrated the development of their subject by the use of a neutered problem which just brought out, for example, the legal bit, or the financial bit.

One part of integration - deliberate, very challenging, very controversial - was to go to employers and ask “what does a person have to know, understand and be able to do, to be more effective as an employee?” Initially many employers couldn’t or were reluctant to answer the questions, which in itself was revealing, but by persistently questioning, not unnaturally, we received answers involving the perceived essential elements of “Economics, Accounting, Law”, but not phrased in academic jargon or grouped in academic subjects. We grouped the various general and principal learning objectives into modules. A module being defined by BTEC as part of a whole. We did not use the word “unit” - which had been given a precise definition by the Technician Education Council and we eschewed the word “subject”. By using “module” we could structure a course so that within most modules there was some of the content that had been covered in previous subjects, though presented in a way that related the knowledge, understanding and skills learnt to realistic applications in the world of work. This meant that the lawyer was uncomfortable, as was the accountant. This comes back to your point about the launch of BEC programmes requiring considerable college staff development. We had restructured the knowledge and understanding in each programme so that it would be more apparent to the student that this actually

could be used in “real life”, and this process had, indeed, led to the effective integration of previously discrete subjects.

I said we didn't use the word “unit” - BEC was born nine months after TEC. TEC had, for sound reasons, gone for units. Employers agreed on the need for technician education, they all knew precisely what it was. However, in Engineering TEC had to create 29 Programme Committees, so what the Council did was introduce units to enable students to break down some of the artificial barriers between various courses. The unit concept was used to promote a credit accumulation philosophy. This, quite wrongly, was characterised as “two reds, a blue and a green and you have your certificate”. In the BEC areas of activity employers often didn't fully acknowledge the need for education and training for administrative and non-technician employees. However, one thing they had picked up on was that life didn't come in convenient boxes labeled “two reds, a blue and a green”. These employers made it clear to BEC there would be no future if it went down the road of units. Hence the reasons why the different jargon turned up were we had to get away from subjects to break the mould with the teachers. We had to avoid using the jargon “units” so that we did not alienate our client employers.

I'm an engineer, a mathematician engineer, so if I'm told there is a problem I tend to look far wider than the initial description because often the “problem” is a symptom rather than that which you should really be addressing. I went to see building societies, accountants, bankers and insurer employers and I said, “Surely , if you are recruiting people at A Level equivalent there must be

employee needs knowledge, understanding and skills which are common to all of you?" - that is where the "core" concept came from. incidentally, as part of my discussions, I was finding that all these employers were assuming that people could speak and write clear English, that they could identify a problem, and that they could actually do "sums", that is that they were numerate. All this was assumed. Regrettably this was and is not true. Hence to tackle these learning needs, we designed, introduced and assessed student attainment in BEC Central Themes. From my own experience as a Head of Department in a Polytechnic, where I had seen restless engineers sitting through Liberal studies and Communication Studies - I knew central themes were vitally important, but if you taught them as a subject you were lost. This was where BTEC had a plus and a minus - its themes, bound together, were the living links between the modules - good for businesses who didn't want "two reds, a blue and a green" - but quite a disadvantage when you are thinking about credit accumulation and transfer. BEC Central Themes were one of the right innovations for the time. Though, when it came to the merger with TEC, the apparent rigidity on credit accumulation imposed by the Central Themes was beginning to become a partial embarrassment.

You asked about GNVQs. NCVQ have come, independently, to the same conclusion. GNVQs and NVQs are not undoing much of the work of TEC, BEC and BTEC, they are reinforcing the ideas of modularity, core elements, and central themes. The potential threat is that Ministers have got hold of the good ideas and they want to introduce them into A levels. By continuing to insist on discrete and self-contained A Level syllabi allowing students the



flexibility to choose any two , three, four, if we are not careful, the debate will drive us back into the era of separate subjects, externally examinable and we will have lost all the benefits that BEC and BTEC brought to the system. We live in an interesting time!

**RF:** *Something which I've heard people say is that "BTEC didn't want external testing of GNVQs but it was forced upon them", I wondered if there is any truth in that?*

**JS:** One of the difficulties that parents have, regardless of social background, is that they know there is a possibility that if the person who teaches their child does all the assessment then it is capable of been fiddled. If that thought is fed by the media, or by politicians, then there is scope there for the idea to grow that this malpractice goes on. Parents also sometimes have a naive view, until it's their child that fails, that if you measure everyone against the same calibrating stick, and the person holding that stick is not at the same school or college, then it must be correct because it is uniformly applied. They fail to ask "what is it measuring?" Here you have a classical dilemma of BEC and BTEC. BEC faced this and BTEC continues to face this. The previous job of BEC and BTEC was to put together a national framework of work-related educational qualifications - this resulted in programmes leading to First, National and Higher National Certificates/Diplomas. These had to have comparable standards between the awards at each level regardless of industrial or commercial area. In addition, the programmes had not only to meet national needs and standards but also, the programmes had to have

local employment relevance. To meet the dual requirements of national standards and local relevance local providers must be allowed and be able to show that they can interpret the guide-lines and assess the students. When the contract between BTEC and a centre starts we make the assumption that everyone is professional and we use statistical sampling in all kinds of ways to check the assumption is correct and the national standards are attained and maintained.

By putting a system together like that you create a situation where a college in Blackpool could have a large number of options in Leisure and Tourism, and a college in Norwich, building on the Business and Finance core, might have a high number of options in insurance. Hence a centre can shape the total package to the needs of the community while still knowing that its students who pass, have reached the national standards - the problem was how to monitor these professionals to ensure there were no "bad eggs". We got a fairly sensible, it seems cumbersome, but sensible system. You had a moderator who went to look, we moderated the moderators, and last but not least, we did an independent direct monitoring of student in-course assignments on a geographical regional basis.

The downside of nationally set external tests is that when you set a test it must be the same test nation-wide. If you put the same test nation-wide on a module it can't be locally relevant, hopefully it will be relevant, but it can't have the same local sharpness because to be sharp in Blackpool is penalising Bradford. So you are beginning to look more like the traditional A Level/GCSE

system, a system which turned off many of the people coming to BTEC. That's a secondary point, but not one to be thrown away. What BEC did, in the early days, was to ask "Is this really the way forward?" and decided not. However, with the introduction by Government of GNVQ the debate moved on, BTEC is involved but we look on external testing as one part of the assessment system - NCVQ see it in the same way. The purpose of the external test is to assess whether the student has a base of recall knowledge and minimal understanding. We are not looking for minimalism but if you satisfy yourself that candidates are literate and that they can reason, choosing between alternatives, you are saying that they have some understanding. We have gone for machine markable external tests and that is purely on economic criteria. We could have, very soon, 200,000 people taking somewhere between 5 and 8 mandatory unit tests four times a year. Hopefully they won't take each of them four times, the country can't afford it.

**RF:** *I was recently reading of a system in the US where its possible to do a test on computer and to get the result within four minutes of completion.*

**JS:** We are not going to do that. That I'm sure ultimately will be possible but, to give you an idea of the cost and effort involved in our limited exercise, between July and December 1993, with the help of a lot of academics, we had to produce 25,000 test items and that was after we persuaded NCVQ to agree to 40 items a test, they had wanted 60 to 70 items per one hour test. A further argument, on educational grounds, for external tests to be but one of the means of assessment, is that a person who has linguistic problems



because they are from a different ethnic background is severely disadvantaged when distinguishing between tightly worded alternatives.

**RF:** *Those test items are immensely difficult to write and very easy to criticise and take apart.*

**JS:** Yes. Given the statement you've made we have to ask the question why don't we hear, or read, of more criticism of GCSE or A Level? The answer is that those questions are much wider in their scope and a general member of the public never sees the answer. If they did it would maybe have the same effect.

**RF:** *I think you may have touched on what was going to be my next question. I was going to ask about some of the difficulties associated with moderation and verification under the old BTEC system. I suppose that the idea of external testing was partly to deal with the problems which arise with human fallibility? One of the criticisms which has often been made of BTEC is that of variability in standards between different centres.*

**JS:** You're right. I would be foolish to say that there was no variability. However, because our system was open, and because there was no externally set and marked test, it invites people to make these sort of statements. I believe that if you looked at GCSE and A Level in the same way, across a range of subjects, you could have some fascinating debates. You have prompted me, I didn't fully answer your question on GNVQ testing.

If we get it right, through continuous improvement, this element of external testing on basic knowledge and recall, is a reinforcement of standards not a substitution for them. You suggested that we were dragged in “screaming and Kicking” - the thing that we worried about, and still do, was pushing people into a mechanistic system and losing the flexibility needed for local relevance in the programmes. We think that by going for machine marking of the core units on economic and educational grounds, we will keep things to the minimum necessary to boost confidence in standards without knocking the flexibility too hard.

**RF:** *One of the ways in which people judge the quality of something is by considering how easy it is to gain entry - I suppose its part of that of the Groucho Marx thing about not wanting to be part of any club which will accept you as a member. In the early days of BEC National many FE staff were despondent that the entry qualification was only four 'O's when they had hoped it would be five. There was however a “policing” system and special entry for candidates with less than four 'O's could be applied for on the infamous “E60” forms, many of which were rejected. Now, it is part of the GNVQ philosophy to have “open entry” - obviously there are some criteria to do with whether or not a person can benefit from the programme, but I wondered about the possible impact of this on the search for parity of esteem?*

**JS:** This could be debated *ad nauseam*. NCVQ started with NVQs, which are competence based outcome related programmes, process doesn't matter - if you can do it then you get the NVQ. Great, but we are not debating that, but because of that philosophy there is no question of input or process. NCVQ and the Government were persuaded of the fact that NVQs would not cover everyone outside of GCSE and A Level, and GNVQs were invented.

Now, the problem is when you are relatively new, and you have to bring a new string to your argument, you are extremely conscious that you must not knock the original argument. Therefore the whole idea of open access and outcomes came through with GNVQ, I have no problem with that but it came through in a way which was not necessarily as helpful as it might have been when you think that GNVQs were going to be put, by and large, into an education institutional context. A number of things are sharpening the mind, none of them educational.

The FEFC pays on entry, on progress and on completion. If too many are taken on the wrong course then money is lost - that is quite persuasive. Also, the Government have set up pseudo competition through league tables. If, as frequently happened in FE in the old days, you put the "bottoms on the part-time seats" and lose them, it shows not only in your finance, but in your public image. So, whatever may be said, I think the thing may be self-correcting. My worry is that it might be self correcting in an extreme. As you said, BEC National started out with a four 'O' level entry requirement. We had four to rationalise a situation where Finance had five, Business had four, and



Distribution had three. We said four “relevant” subjects, which we felt was tighter. Even when we did have open entry to BEC General [later BTEC First] some colleges were only recruiting people with three ‘O’s. That was not exactly opening things up. I think that NCVQ have been very astute in that they have declined to state fixed entry requirements and other mechanisms in the system are bringing sense back into it. It’s still the admissions lecturer who determines.

The fascinating thing now is that colleges are paid on input, progress and output, but what is the trade off, financially, in getting a person through in one year instead of two? As a consequence what, if anything, is detrimental to that individual who goes through the process so quickly? For the quick learner the answer is no detriment, indeed, a plus for the average learner? I don’t know. It’ is going to be interesting to see some of the consequences of the new financial drive in education. There is a positive incentive for the colleges to “bung ‘em through” quickly.

**RF:** *Looking at progression from BTEC into HE degree programmes. Over the years, as a course tutor in FE, I’ve come across quite a lot of, I think understandable, confusion amongst HE Admissions Tutors regarding BTEC. Being appointed an Admissions Tutor is sometimes seen as being offered a “poisoned chalice” and the job gets passed around. HE entry offers to BTEC students have, in my experience, often been made in ways which suggest that staff in universities don’t really understand the qualifications. This is not really surprising given the changes in grading from A to E with an overall*

*Distinction possible; then to D, M, P, R, F: and now to the GNVQ system of an overall grade arising from a portfolio. I feel anxious about this, both about how the portfolio will be graded and about how HE will react to yet another change.*

**JS:** There is an answer to that, which is, "If in doubt ask for a Distinction". That isn't a flippant remark. You gave a potted history of BEC. We started out by asking a lot. On this I'm unrepentant - we were right. We asked the colleges to provide a coursework mark, an end of module mark, and to declare them separately. Our argument was that they measured different things. If we were wrong you could do away with the coursework and just have the examination - no one agreed with that. Over a very short time, because the colleges were very busy and said they couldn't cope with this duality, they pressed us to combine two things which were measuring different things to get one grade. That was resisted by BTEC but it came about due to Government pressure, and we agreed to classify successful students by one of Pass, Merit and Distinction for each module. NCVQ say that in a unit in NVQ you are either competent or you are not - "pass, or 'not yet competent'". When it came to GNVQs we were quite clear that if there were only the classifications of "Pass" and "not yet achieved targets", then that would not help the students into HE. NCVQ resisted the proposal favoured by HE for classification per unit but agreed that the overall grading of a GNVQ could include Pass and Distinction. This made it possible to bind in the skills and the portfolio of in-course assessment. However this masking

of the student's performance in individual GNVQ units is causing one hell of a backlash at the moment. I believe it will have to go back to unit grading.

**RF:** *I wondered what your reaction was to the recent Channel Four Dispatches programme [All Our Futures (Smithers 1993)] featuring Professor Smithers's views on NVQs and GNVQs?*

**JS:** I think that the research basis for that report is at least dubious. There is a little too much apocryphal content, having said that, I believe that NCVQ's [see NCVQ 1993] "blow by blow" justification is also somewhat naive. We are after all talking about a major change, drawing on much that BTEC has done. To think you can get it right first time is naive, to say that there are possible shortcomings must be right. Smithers has surveyed a two year programme half way through the first year and come to some very strong conclusions, which is at least remarkable. If Smithers had said "I've had a preliminary look, I will do some deeper research and present this to the NCVQ and the awarding bodies to look at when they came to do their review", then it would have been exceedingly valuable. If NCVQ had said "this is a somewhat biased report but we have a new product and could perhaps take on board some of the criticisms made", that too would have been helpful. Instead a confrontation has been set up. BTEC is outside of this, but we are up to our ears in GNVQ. Our view is that we have to listen to both mouths and to watch feet. Almost 60,000 young people started GNVQs in September 1993, there appears to be a demand, so we have got to get the product right by continuous improvement rather than tear it up and start all over again.



**RF:** *To some extent I share your view. I agree with many criticisms in the programme, and also criticisms of the programme - I suppose that the medium of television often invites a "tabloid" approach. There was an implication that individual teachers get paid more if the student passes which, of course, is not the case; at least not yet.*

**JS:** On the new FEFC funding the college does get more if the student passes, but the implication of the programme was that teachers make it easy. Smithers has done a lot of sound research in the past, but I don't think that could be said of what was broadcast.

**RF:** *Do you think that the employers have been more enthusiastic about BTEC than HE has?*

**JS:** Its hard to say. When Haslegrave started his work I understand that a possible idea in his, and the Government's mind, was to set up just one "Education Council". As Haslegrave went on it became apparent that employers would not turn employees loose on capital equipment unless they were further educated or trained, because they would either get injured or they would damage the equipment. So, on the technician side there was no question that employers supported training. On the business side though it was too often a case of "welcome, sit next to him, or her, and you'll find out how we do it". Sometimes one employer would have different policies for technician and for business/administration staff. It was decided that there should be two councils because two different challenges existed.

As a mathematician engineer I was driving the Business Education Council where there was no strong throughput - my advantage was that employers had no pre-conceived demarcation lines. In BEC we had fewer programme advisory committees than TEC, so we had a persuasive sales pitch and there was a large market there. Up to three years ago over 50 per cent of the BTEC students were in work and their employers were paying to send them, which gave us a “feel good” factor, but now we are down to less than 40 per cent part-timers. I worry. I could explain this away by blaming the recession or pointing out that more people are staying in full-time education longer. However, I want to see that percentage up again as the recession recedes, though the way the Government is selling GNVQs does not help. They are trying to get the point over that NVQs are assessed in the workplace and, *ipso facto*, GNVQs are seen as for those who are not in work. What we want are GNVQs for those who want a broad based course, and that can be done full-time or part-time. BTEC is leading a campaign to get a higher profile and take up for part-time GNVQs.

There is something which you haven't touched on in your questions. BTEC, rightly or wrongly, and I would take any blame, has looked on tension as a helpful thing which can be put to greater good. I often use the inelegant phrase “work-related education” as opposed to “vocational this or that”. “Work-related” - if people can't apply what they know and understand to a job then we have failed. “Education” - if they haven't got a broad base of knowledge and understanding upon which they can build and cope with change, we have failed. There is a potential tension between work-related

needs and educational needs, as there is between the questions “can they get a job?” and “can they go to university?” These objectives, in their extremes, require different things. If you can get the balance of knowledge, understanding and their application that people master such that they are employable, *and* they have the base from which to grow, then you have opened many doors for them. These tensions are uncomfortable for BTEC, uncomfortable for colleges, and nigh-on impossible for politicians because they like to describe things concisely. College lecturers feel more comfortable if its either for work *or* for the mind. If its in the middle there is the question of “Am I in the middle?”, “Where is the middle?”, “How do I describe the middle?” In a sense my contribution, for better or for worse, was to advocate and choose the middle ground; the balance of knowledge, understanding and application, and, over the years, to develop the system to meet the changing needs of education and employment whilst maintaining the balance required by 60 per cent of the population. NCVQ have seen, Mr. Patten [then Minister of State for Education] seems to suggest that he has seen, that GNVQs are in the middle ground. I don’t think that Mr. Patten, or GNVQ, quite relish the idea of keeping the thing in the middle ground because you are open to sniping from Smithers, from employers, from everyone because it is not easily described or defended as employment training or academic development of the mind. It is apparently a compromise. I personally think that it is a marvelous combination which can, by continuous improvement, be a world beater.



**RF:** *Looking to the future, it was once said that the nation-state would one day whither away. I have heard the same thing said of BTEC. Do you think that is likely?*

**JS:** I've heard it too. BTEC isn't in business for self preservation. We only have two products. One is the guidance which we give on the content, context and assessment. That is read by three client groups - the parents/students; the college staff; and employers. The employer asks "Why should I pay a day's wages for someone to attend?" or "Why should I recruit one of these people rather than an A Level or degree person?" Each year over the last five or six years there have been more students recruited to BTEC than ever before, and the percentage increase is outstripping the increase in the size of the cohort. College Principals are bringing an increasing number of programmes to BTEC for approval. Employers I worry about, because the proportion of part-timers is falling. The thing that keeps my spirits up is destination - surveys of full-timers show that BTEC qualified students have less unemployment than those with other qualifications. There is a need. If we don't satisfy it, with quality, then we deserve not to be here. Our other product is to ensure that there is a comparable standard across industries for a particular level of qualification. Here we can point to professional body exemption, HE take up, and, for full-timers, employment take up. They are holding up well. As I said, if we do our job well we don't deserve to be here. At the moment we don't seem to be losing the battle.

**RF:** *Thank you for your frank answers to my questions.*  
**END OF FORMAL INTERVIEW**

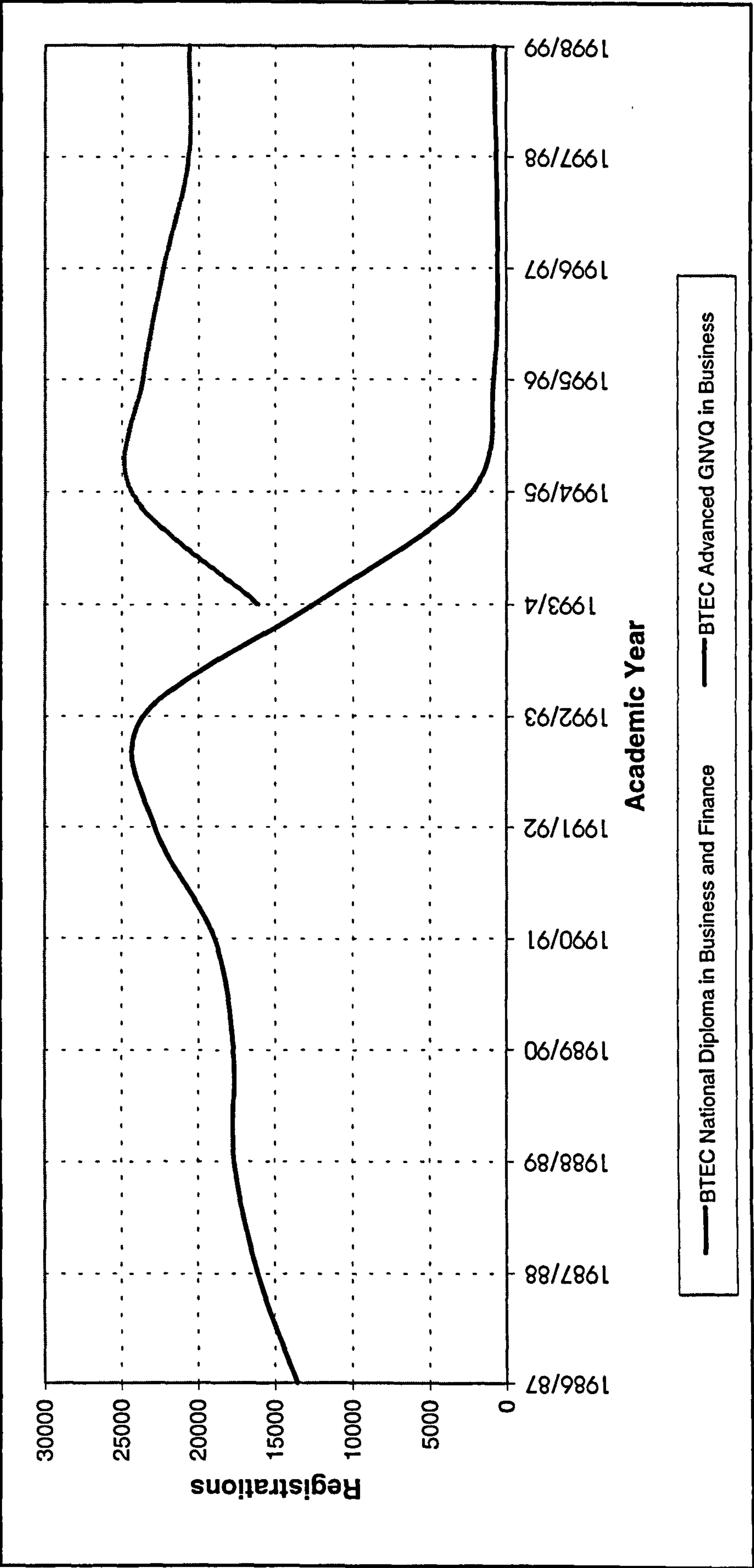
## **APPENDIX D**

### **National Registration Figures for the BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance and the BTEC Advanced GNVQ in Business: 1986/87 to 1998/99**

**[information supplied by Edexcel's Business Improvement Group on 25 June 1999]**

NATIONAL REGISTRATION FIGURES

	Academic Year												
	1986/87	1987/88	1988/89	1989/90	1990/91	1991/92	1992/93	1993/4	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99
BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance	13560	16088	17629	17691	18956	22857	23590	12502	2312	851	581	668	839
BTEC Advanced GNVQ in Business								16082	24376	23630	22303	20660	20619





# NATIONAL REGISTRATION FIGURES

	Academic Year												
	1986/87	1987/88	1988/89	1989/90	1990/91	1991/92	1992/93	1993/4	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99
BTEC National Diploma in Business and Finance	13560	16088	17629	17691	18956	22857	23590	12502	2312	851	581	668	839
BTEC Advanced GNVQ in Business								16082	24376	23630	22303	20660	20619

